

**WESTERN COMMUNITY COLLEGE AREA
BOARD OF GOVERNORS**

**INFORMAL MEETING
MINUTES**

Wednesday, September 17, 2025

The Western Community College Area Board of Governors held an Informal Board meeting at 10:30 a.m. on Wednesday, September 17, 2025, at Western Nebraska Community College Scottsbluff Campus, 1601 East 27th Street, in the City of Scottsbluff, in the County of Scotts Bluff, in the State of Nebraska, as per the publicized notice in the Star-Herald on Tuesday, September 9, 2025.

A current agenda was available in the Board Secretary's office on the Scottsbluff Campus at the time of the publicized notice.

ROLL CALL AREA

Linda A. Guzman-Gonzales	Present (arrived at 10:36 a.m.)
Joshua R. Hanson.....	Present
Mark A. Kaufman	Present
Allan D. Kreman	Present (arrived at 10:34 a.m.)
Starr Lehl, Vice Chairperson	Present
Lori J. Liggett.....	Present
William M. Packard	Present
Coral E. Richards.....	Present
R. J. Savely, Jr	Present
Marjorie A. Schmidt.....	Present
John P. Stinner, Chairperson.....	Present

QUORUM

Chair Stinner declared a quorum was present for the transaction of business.

COMMUNITY COMMENTS

Chair Stinner asked for comments from the community. Pursuant to Board Policy BP-106, community members who wish to make comments will be limited to a five-minute presentation. There were no comments.

BOARD CHAIR COMMENTS

Chair Stinner announced for public information there was a copy of the Nebraska Open Meetings Act available on the table at the back of the room.

WNCC Budgets Review

Ms. Koski, Vice President of Administrative Services, reminded the Board that two public hearings are required, prior to the regular meeting today. The first is the budget hearing. Chair Stinner will open the budget hearing, information will be reviewed and then the hearing will be closed. Chair Stinner will then open the tax hearing, review that information, then close the hearing. The Board will be asked to approve the proposed budgets at the regular meeting.

Discussion began with the General Operating Budget. The revenue section includes tuition and fees, remissions, state aid, and property taxes—all sources of ongoing support for annual college expenditures. The 2024-25 budget was compared to the proposed 2025-26 budget.

WNCC Budgets Review (cont.)

The subtotal for operating revenue shows a slight increase of \$185,789 or 0.64% over the prior year. Additionally, it was proposed that some cash reserve revenues be utilized for one-time expenditures. This brings the total general fund revenue budget to \$33,819,188, representing a 10% increase, primarily due to the inclusion of cash reserves.

Ms. Koski explained that the expenditure information includes personnel, materials, and supplies—reflecting ongoing annual budget items. The 2025-26 proposed budget shows that ongoing revenues align with ongoing expenditures. The subtotal for these ongoing expenditures reflects a decrease of approximately \$707,000, or 2.35%.

One-time expenditures funded by cash reserves were outlined, including equipment purchases, consultant and contractor services tied to strategic planning, and potential costs related to TRIO and Veterans Upward Bound programs. Open commitments from FY 2025 were carried forward. The most significant item was the planned debt payoff of a lease purchase agreement totaling \$3,290,619. This move will reduce college debt and free up future annual funding. Both the General Operating Fund and Capital Fund will be utilized to significantly reduce college debt. The general operating expense budget balances to the proposed revenues, showing a 10% total increase over the prior year.

Ms. Koski reviewed the breakdown of the operating revenue categories and their percentage share of total revenue. Notable changes include a reduction in state aid and future fund percentages, which is tied to the increase in cash reserve usage. When excluding the cash reserves, revenue distribution remains similar to the previous year. It was clarified that the line item labeled local property taxes includes miscellaneous state tax distributions such as motor vehicle prorated and does not reflect new taxes levied by the College.

The expenditure data was presented in two formats:

1. By program classification – standard categories such as instruction, academic support, and student services.
2. By object – breaking down into personnel, operations, and travel.

It was noted that personnel costs made up 65% of the budget in FY25, but are now down to 59%, impacted by the inclusion of one-time debt payoff expenditures.

A question was asked regarding how these ratios compare to peer institutions. The response noted that they are similar, with variations based on institutional priorities. Peer institutions typically range between 60% to 75% of budget spent on personnel. The Coordinating Commission provides comparative reports every three to five years, which the College uses for benchmarking. No specific targets are currently set, but the strategic planning process and new budget models will consider setting formal targets moving forward.

The Capital Improvement Fund is primarily supported by property taxes. Ms. Koski explained that the calculation of gross and net tax requests are based on county assessor-certified valuations. Capital funding includes the tax levy and a facility fee per credit hour paid by students. These are kept in separate accounts for accounting purposes but rolled into the Capital Improvement Fund as a whole.

WNCC Budgets Review (cont.)

Additional revenue sources include:

- Cash reserves brought forward: just over \$4 million
- Estimated tax receipts: \$3.6 million
- Miscellaneous tax revenues
- Foundation pledge: \$95,000 annually for 10 years, tied to the Welcome Center renovation
- Transfers from student housing (dorm debt support) and from auxiliary fund facility rental in support of the Harms Center ARPA project
- Facility fee revenue: \$88,726

The total projected capital revenue budget is \$9,073,788.

The expenditure side includes:

- Ongoing projects carried forward, including Health Science Expansion (\$2.7 million), scheduled for completion by Spring semester.
- New 2025-26 projects, including internal and external facility upgrades, theater stage repairs, and Metasys system upgrade (for HVAC efficiency and remote system management).

Debt service includes standard annual payments. The proposal includes paying off the student housing dorm bonds using \$1.1 million in facility fees, totaling \$1,454,120. The combined payoffs from the general and capital funds will reduce college debt from \$8.5 million to \$2.5 million, resulting in:

- \$730,000 in annual savings
- \$600,000 in avoided interest by paying early

A question was raised regarding the difference in gross tax dollars (\$3,663,000) versus total tax receipts (\$3,647,000). The explanation clarified that this reflects the calculated levy amount, while the lower section includes miscellaneous taxes (motor vehicle prorate, nameplate capacity tax, in-lieu taxes), which account for the difference.

An additional comment was made to emphasize the significance of the \$700,000 in annual savings, expressing appreciation for the effort.

Board Training

Review of Strategic Plan Report Card

President Dart reminded attendees that during the previous meeting, Board members received an update on the progress of WNCC's 2023–2027 Strategic Plan. Board members were asked to grade the institution's progress on the strategic objectives and sub-objectives outlined in that report.

At this meeting, a compiled version of those grades was presented in the form of a Strategic Plan Report Card. This report card serves as an internal assessment tool and as a checkpoint for progress toward strategic goals.

The overall institutional GPA, based on the grades submitted by the Board, was 3.121. This score was described as in the "middle of the road"—not low enough to be considered a concern, but not high enough to reflect excellence.

Each of the nineteen strategic objectives received an average grade, with no objective weighted more heavily than another. While individual comments were not included in the report card summary, they were reviewed separately and found to be insightful and helpful in identifying areas needing further development.

Board Training

Review of Strategic Plan Report Card (cont.)

The results indicated a number of strengths in areas where significant progress has already been made. Specifically, the College has seen substantial growth in its dual credit programs, particularly in the communities of Bridgeport, Potter-Dix, and Cody-Kilgore. Additionally, the institution has made progress in building stronger relationships with local businesses, especially manufacturers in the Northern Tier, who require specific workforce solutions.

The area most identified for improvement was WNCC's presence across the Panhandle. Due to the geographic size of the service region, this remains an ongoing challenge. President Dart stated that continued outreach is planned. For example, upcoming visits to Alliance and Sidney will focus on campus-specific strategic planning. These planning efforts will include a broader regional perspective to ensure each campus's strategy benefits surrounding communities such as Potter-Dix, Chappell, and others.

The leadership team will use the report card data and accompanying status indicators (Completed, In Progress, Not Started) to help determine areas of focus moving forward. President Dart expressed appreciation for the thoughtfulness reflected in the grading and comments, which will be used to help refine ongoing efforts.

It was proposed and agreed that the grading process be repeated annually. This will allow the board to continue monitoring progress and prepare effectively for the next strategic planning cycle, which is expected to begin in approximately one year.

The Strategic Plan Report Card will be shared with the broader WNCC community and made available online. It will also be used as documentation in institutional assessment processes, including accreditation activities with the Higher Learning Commission (HLC). Leadership confirmed that this report serves as valuable evidence of institutional effectiveness and continuous improvement.

Several board members acknowledged the usefulness of the grading exercise and commented on the constructive nature of the written feedback. The group agreed that the report card is a meaningful tool for reflection and planning.

Board Training

Academic Freedom/Freedom of Expression

President Dart clarified that two draft documents were being shared for informational purposes only. No action was required at this time. These drafts represent over a year's worth of collaborative work related to academic freedom at WNCC.

President Dart expressed a need to discuss the meaning and importance of academic freedom, and to explain the rationale behind the significant effort invested in drafting this policy and procedure.

Academic freedom has long been a core principle in higher education, but its relevance and scrutiny have increased significantly in recent years. Publications such as *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed* regularly highlight academic freedom as a central topic of concern.

Academic freedom primarily grants faculty control over classroom content. While the Board determines curriculum, programs, and credentials, the specific classroom content is within the faculty's purview. This distinction underscores the importance of hiring subject-matter experts.

Board Training

Academic Freedom/Freedom of Expression (cont.)

President Dart noted a recent tragic event involving Charlie Kirk at a Utah campus, illustrating the tension and debate over campus speakers and the broader implications for freedom of expression and academic freedom. He emphasized that campuses must remain spaces for the free exchange of ideas, even controversial ones.

Academic freedom involves protection for faculty to teach controversial or challenging topics without fear of institutional retaliation. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) has been a key voice in this space.

The AAUP issued its foundational statement on academic freedom in 1940, building upon earlier work dating back to 1915. This statement remains a gold standard for institutions across the country. Notably, while WNCC does not offer tenure, it provides continuing contracts, which serve a similar function. A 1925 conference by the American Council on Education further emphasized the importance of academic freedom.

Faculty are entitled to full freedom in research and publication, provided it does not interfere with their primary academic responsibilities. Research conducted for external financial return must be coordinated with the institution.

Faculty are entitled to freedom in discussing their subject matter. However, they should avoid introducing unrelated controversial topics. The policy advises institutions with specific religious or ideological missions to state such limitations clearly in writing upon faculty appointment.

Faculty, as members of the community and profession, have the right to speak as private citizens without institutional censorship. However, they are also expected to exercise restraint, respect differing opinions, and clarify when they are not speaking on behalf of the institution.

In response to an inquiry, President Dart explained that classroom observations and evaluations occur through scheduled visits by deans, division chairs, or the vice president, though these are not typically shared with the Board unless an issue arises.

Although such debates may seem more relevant at liberal arts colleges or research universities, WNCC faculty initiated this process due to growing national concerns. For example, a Texas senator authored legislation affecting faculty tenure and was later named sole finalist for a university chancellor position—highlighting the increasing politicization of higher education.

At WNCC, faculty raised concerns about protections for those teaching potentially controversial subjects, such as political science or history. They also expressed concern over freedom of expression outside the classroom. While faculty originally drafted the policy, the process later included input from administrators, legal counsel, and other stakeholders. Over time, the scope expanded to include protections for staff and students as well.

Academic Freedom/Freedom of Expression (cont.)

In addition to the academic freedom policy, three other interconnected policies are being developed:

- *Freedom of Expression Policy*: Addresses broader free speech rights across the college community.
- *Use of Facilities Policy*: Clarifies how campus spaces may be used, including by outside groups and for events such as protests.
- *Social Media Policy*: Currently in development, this policy will address online conduct and clarify that employees should not present personal opinions as institutional positions.

In response to an inquiry, President Dart stated that faculty and staff sign a code of conduct upon hiring and any time it is revised. Students also agree to a code of conduct. There is a separate code of conduct for the Board, which was recently reviewed and updated.

The draft Academic Freedom policy (BP-221) incorporates language from Nebraska State Statute 85-1511, the U.S. Constitution, the Nebraska State Constitution, and AAUP guidelines.

Key components include:

- Faculty rights and responsibilities in academic settings.
- Defined limits to academic freedom, clarifying that faculty are not free to say or do anything without accountability.
- Specific rights afforded to students, including:
 - Freedom of expression in the classroom.
 - Right to take reasoned exception to content presented.
 - Protection from punishment for expressing differing academic opinions.

President Dart concluded by emphasizing the importance of clearly defining protections and limitations of academic freedom. Faculty need the freedom to teach without fear of reprisal, particularly as national discussions around indoctrination and institutional control grow more intense. While academic freedom may appear less controversial at a community college like WNCC, establishing a clear and balanced policy is critical. The Board will be given the opportunity to review and provide input on the draft before any formal action is taken.

Board Member Comments

Ms. Koski was thanked for her time spent preparing for today's meetings.

Next Regular Meeting: Wednesday, September 17, 2025, immediately following the Budget Hearing, approximately 1:30 p.m., Coral E. Richards Boardroom, Scottsbluff Campus, 1601 East 27th Street, Scottsbluff, NE.

Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned by unanimous consent at 11:59 a.m.

John P. Stinner, Chairperson

Susan L. Verbeck, Secretary