

2025–26 WSPH Staff Council Meeting Minutes

Date: May 7, 2026 | Time: 11:30 AM | Location: Virtual / In Person

Called to Order

Approximately 11:35 AM

Presiding

Nichole Valenzuela

Attendance

Present: Akilesh Kandregula, Nichole Valenzuela, Brendan Carter, Michael Fox, Phillip Williams, Marigny Bostock, Jodie Montrel, Daniella Fontana Bermudez, Connor Livingston, Emma Powers, Cristina Miller, Cassieta Trawick, Farhana Chaudhry, Tom Augustson, Amy Carreras, Jay Freeman, and Libby Favrot, Susan Barrera.

1. Call to Order

Nichole Valenzuela called the meeting to order after lunch was distributed. She thanked members for attending during a busy graduation period and noted that the meeting had been kept on the calendar despite the end-of-semester schedule.

2. Old Business

Elections - Dates

Staff Council confirmed the timeline for the upcoming nominations and elections. Department nomination forms will be open from May 22 through June 12, 2026. The voting period will run from June 22 through June 26, 2026. Leadership will contact nominees who were not self-nominated to confirm whether they accept nomination before the voting period begins.

Members discussed the possibility of holding a staff engagement event during the nomination window to promote elections and encourage participation. A snowball event was discussed as one possible option, consistent with a prior year's approach. Libby Favrot noted that planning support would be helpful, and Cassieta Trawick offered to assist. Imperial was mentioned as the prior vendor used for snowballs.

Postdoctoral Fellows

A follow-up was provided regarding prior concerns about postdoctoral fellows and staff communications. Brendan Carter and Nichole Valenzuela reviewed the issue and clarified that the concern was not primarily about postdocs receiving general staff communications, but rather about other training and resource needs. Leadership plans to meet with postdoctoral fellows in a smaller setting first to better understand their needs before bringing the topic back to the full Council.

3. New Staff Council Business

June Staff Council Meeting

Nichole proposed making the June Staff Council meeting less business-focused and more social, as a way to recognize members' time and service over the year. Members discussed repeating a prior format at Wave City

Market with lunch and a light activity. The group expressed support for meeting at Wave City Market on June 4, 2026. Members were asked to arrive by approximately 11:45 AM so that food orders can be handled together.

Members discussed possible activities for the June meeting, including trivia or a group-based scavenger hunt-style activity. Staff Council trivia from the previous year was mentioned as an example, though members noted that the activity could be broader and more informal. Volunteers were invited to help develop the activity after graduation.

Feedback Regarding REDCap and the Office of Research

The Council discussed staff concerns regarding REDCap administration and interactions with the Office of Research. The issue originated from broader questions about cross-departmental collaboration and communication raised during the Fireside Chat. Several staff members reported concerns about unclear processes, communication challenges, and perceived resistance when requesting REDCap support or changes.

It was noted that staff working directly with REDCap need clear, consistent policies and communication from system administrators, especially when software changes affect research workflows. Other members emphasized that research projects vary widely in design, staffing, and technical expertise, making consistent and supportive communication especially important.

Members discussed whether Staff Council should directly gather feedback or whether the concern should be routed through research leadership. Tom Augustson recommended bringing the issue to the Associate Dean for Research, noting that this route would be more appropriate because the matter affects research operations and faculty/staff workflows across projects. The Council discussed the possibility of a listening session coordinated through research leadership and/or a carefully designed survey to collect staff and faculty feedback without duplicating other survey efforts or framing the issue too narrowly.

Data Leak / Oracle Security Concern

Nichole shared that some staff had asked whether additional information was available regarding the recent data leak notification. Julio Diaz indicated that HR does not have additional information beyond what was included in the notification letter sent to impacted employees. Staff with questions should use the contact information included in the notification letter. The notification included access to identity monitoring resources, and members were reminded that they may also freeze their credit if concerned.

Akilesh provided additional context about the seriousness of a zero-day exploit and explained that such vulnerabilities can expose broader system risks. He noted that staff may not fully understand the implications and suggested that further explanation from the appropriate technical or security office may be useful.

Game Night

The Council discussed plans for a staff game night inspired by conversations at Staff Night Out with the Dean. The Health and Wellness Committee is expected to help lead implementation. Members discussed holding the event in June after graduation, with possible dates around June 11 or June 25. The group leaned toward combining game night with another staff engagement activity and potentially holding it during the election period.

Members discussed whether the event should include board games, snowballs, or a bartender, and noted that combining snowballs and a bartender may not fit the desired format. The concept of a “bring your own board game” event was discussed, with possible activities such as an Uno tournament. The group will continue refining the event plan and date.

Wave of Green Day of Service

Members noted that the Wave of Green Day of Service has been scheduled for May 20, 2026. The date may conflict with student orientation for WSPH, limiting participation from some staff. The event allows staff to volunteer in the community through organized service projects. Members discussed whether staff who cannot attend the designated day might be able to use similar service time for another volunteer opportunity, though it was unclear whether HR or another office would need to approve such flexibility. Nichole agreed to ask Julio Diaz whether this might be possible.

Student Hiring / Handshake and WaveWorks

A question was raised about whether student hiring postings will still use Handshake or move entirely into WaveWorks. Susan Barrera indicated that postings entered in WaveWorks should automatically upload to Handshake.

WaveWorks Office Hours

Members were reminded that WaveWorks office hours are available for staff needing help with specific issues, especially expenses and related workflows. Members were encouraged to attend the sessions, which are being offered at multiple locations including Tidewater, Murphy, and uptown sites.

Year in Review

Nichole invited members to reflect on the year and identify what went well, what could be improved, and what should be continued. Members discussed several events and initiatives, including the back-to-school food pantry, the Thanksgiving support effort, the Super Bowl-related donation effort, Packing with a Purpose, the Staff Retreat, and the Fireside Chat.

Members noted that the back-to-school pantry generated strong interest, while some later efforts may have had lower engagement due to timing or donation fatigue. The Thanksgiving effort was described as especially effective because individual student wish lists made the need feel more personal. The Super Bowl initiative may have benefited from timing around tax returns. Packing with a Purpose was also described as a meaningful service project, though members asked for clarification about where the completed packages were distributed.

Members discussed the need to improve staff event communication, especially for research staff whose schedules are often governed by study needs and PI expectations. Suggestions included asking chairs to remind faculty and PIs about major staff events, sharing event information through Tidewater Times, posting flyers on departmental floors and elevators, and creating a simple upcoming-staff-events flyer. Akilesh offered to help design flyers for upcoming events.

Blood Drive

A question was raised about whether Staff Council could take on more organization of future blood drives, which have previously been handled by Therese. Nichole noted that this would likely fall under the Community Service/Outreach Committee and would be appropriate to discuss with Alisha Williams.

TUPD Self-Defense and Safety Training

Members discussed a recent TUPD self-defense class hosted through student groups and noted that it was well received. The class provided practical safety tips and hands-on practice. Members expressed interest in hosting similar training for staff during the summer, when schedules may be more flexible. Active shooter training is also being explored by the Dean's Office for early June, subject to TUPD availability. Fire extinguisher training was also mentioned as a valuable prior training that could be considered again in the future.

4. Staff Council Committees

Retreat Committee

The Retreat Committee is working to plan the next staff retreat. The Cancer Center is being considered again as the location because it accommodated the group well previously and allows staff to meet together in a more contained space. Tentative dates discussed were October 1 or October 2, 2026. The committee will coordinate with the Dean's calendar and the broader general faculty retreat planning to avoid conflicts.

A draft survey is being prepared to gather staff feedback on retreat themes, potential speakers, swag items, and other preferences. Members were invited to share suggestions with the Retreat Committee. Transportation and safety concerns from prior years were also discussed, including volunteer drivers and TUPD walking escorts.

Community Service / Outreach

Members discussed the Wave of Green Day of Service and potential future involvement with blood drive coordination. Members also noted seeing flyers for a "Community Wave" volunteer initiative and agreed that the committee should look into whether it may present additional partnership opportunities.

Health and Wellness

The main update from Health and Wellness was continued planning for the summer staff game night or related social event.

Staff Appreciation

No major update was provided.

Staff Concerns

No major update was provided.

5. Reports

Executive Faculty Meeting

Tom Augustson reported on the April 23 Executive Faculty Meeting. Updates included graduation planning, WaveWorks updates, and preparation for a general faculty meeting. Admissions updates were provided including concerns about financial aid uncertainty and possible visa-related challenges for international students. Staff and faculty were encouraged to continue outreach to admitted students, especially those who attended admitted student events.

A marketing update was provided by Geraldine St. John, the school's new marketing staff member. She discussed the marketing funnel and noted that email contact remains highly valuable in communicating with prospective and admitted students. Tom noted that the data presented may be useful to share with broader staff at some point. Tom also noted the newly activated research council formed by Kelli Hall.

Safety / Student Travel Concerns

Tom noted that he had an upcoming meeting with campus safety and asked members to share any concerns. Members raised concerns about students traveling between residential locations such as Deming or nearby housing and the Tidewater/BJJ area. Some students are using routes that may be poorly lit, affected by construction, or perceived as unsafe. Members emphasized the importance of identifying and communicating safer travel routes between buildings.

Staff Advisory Council (SAC)

Phillip Williams reported that SAC discussed the new UPass option, which allows students, staff, and faculty to purchase an RTA transit pass for \$85 per semester. Members noted that this reflects improved coordination between the university and RTA.

SAC also discussed the status of the Tulane employee injured in the recent shooting. HR has reportedly addressed any PTO-related concerns for the employee, and a GoFundMe has been established to support medical needs. Phillip offered to share the GoFundMe information with members who would like to contribute. Additional SAC discussion focused primarily on uptown campus facilities projects, including parking impacts related to construction and reallocated parking spaces.

6. HR Announcements

HR updates included reminders about WaveWorks training and office hours. Summer tuition waiver information is now available. The 2026-2027 holiday schedule has been released. Staff were reminded that the Tulane Employee Assistance Program offers free confidential counseling, legal and financial consultations, and other resources for employees and their families. Members were also reminded to use their floating holiday before June 30, 2026.

7. Recap: Action Items

Finalize and communicate the nominations and election timeline: nominations from May 22 through June 12 and voting from June 22 through June 26.

Coordinate planning support for a possible snowball or election-promotion event during the nomination period.

Proceed with a smaller follow-up meeting with postdoctoral fellows to better understand their training and staff-support needs.

Plan the June 4 Staff Council meeting at Wave City Market and identify a volunteer or small group to prepare a game, trivia, or other activity.

Elevate REDCap and Office of Research concerns through appropriate research leadership, including possible coordination with Robert Palestina, Kelly, and/or the research council.

Ask Julio Diaz whether staff who cannot participate in Wave of Green Day of Service may use equivalent service time for another volunteer opportunity.

Continue planning a staff game night or related social event, with June 25 discussed as a possible date.

Follow up on distribution details for the Packing with a Purpose care packages.

Explore improved communication methods for staff events, including faculty/chair reminders, Tidewater Times, flyers, elevator postings, and department-floor postings.

Discuss possible blood drive support with the Community Service/Outreach Committee.

Explore scheduling additional TUPD self-defense training, active shooter training, and possible fire extinguisher training for staff.

Continue planning the staff retreat, including confirming the date, location, survey, theme, speakers, and transportation/safety logistics.

Share safety concerns about student travel routes between housing and downtown campus buildings with campus safety.

Encourage graduation volunteer participation, especially for remaining open shifts.

8. Adjournment

The meeting adjourned after final reminders, including the June 4 Staff Council meeting at Wave City Market and the need for graduation volunteers on May 16, 2026.