

**President Thompson FY24 Comprehensive Evaluation**  
**Input from Board Members**

Dear colleagues:

This year BHE requires us to do a comprehensive evaluation of Dr. Thompson. She has been with us now for over three years, hence, the comprehensive evaluation. The evaluation would consist of the following components:

- 1) Self-evaluation
- 2) Board evaluation
- 3) “Community in general evaluation” by a team of board members

We have shared with the board who the team members are, identified various groups within the community that includes the cabinet members, deans, student body, random faculty, union leaderships and others, as well as wide variety of external stakeholders including local politicians, sister institutions leadership, community leaders in Westfield and surrounding area.

Would you please respond to the following questions by 9/7/2024. Please add any other comments or observations you may have that would help this evaluation process. This evaluation is done in complete confidence. No names will be used during or after the evaluation. All the reports and feedback will be sent directly to Brittney and no other board member. Brittney will manage the feedback with confidentiality. The feedback will be tabulated and sent to the chair and vice chair to be compiled as one comprehensive report to the board for approval and making a recommendation to BHE.

- I. The tone or climate that the President has set for the campus.**
- II. The President’s communication with the campus, the Board and others.**
- III. The President’s effectiveness as a leader to develop an effective team and setting measurable goals (KPI’s) for this team.**
- IV. 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 these.**
- V. The President’s effectiveness as a representative of the University to the broader community.**
- VI. The President’s effectiveness in supporting BHE system-wide priorities including the Equity Agenda (issues of affordability, access, closing achievement gaps, wraparound support services).**

**Other Comments and observations.**

### **The tone or climate that the President has set for the campus**

- The President has been clear that her priority is to restore pride in the institution among faculty, staff, and students. She has, along with her team, accomplished this through initiatives such as Parliament Day, the Values Working Group, and more. The campus community has largely bought into this dream for Westfield State thanks to the optimistic tone that she has set at the top.
- Based on my brief time as a Trustee, I am basing my response primarily on conversations that I have had with other trustees (at the June meeting) and with members of the campus community (at both the June meeting and during my orientation<sup>1</sup>, also in June). During my short time here, I have been impressed by the positive tone and supportive climate that seems to have been fostered by President Thompson. The general sentiment I have encountered is one of respect, admiration, and a sense of shared purpose. There seems to be a lot of admiration for her.
- President Thompson has done an outstanding job of healing the campus and bridging the rift that was created by others between various administrative divisions, the cabinet, the faculty, and the unions. She has put a human face to the issues. Communicated with all the stakeholders effectively. Held open office hours and has heard the campus wisely and effectively. Her action plan and listening tours and changes made are finally paying off. By formation of a cabinet structure and administrative team that is collaborative, analytic, and thoughtful, she has removed the weak and inflexible links and moved the University agenda forward. Her relationship with the student body is superb. She has established a respectful working relation with the unions and the faculty. She is well respected by the board. Her reports and communication with the board are timely and effective. As someone told me recently, "Linda had to do trauma surgery for the first two years and do her real job on the third year." I could not agree more with that statement.
- She simply has changed the tone and climate on the campus for the betterment of the university.
- President Thompson has done an excellent job of establishing a positive climate on campus. She is clearly visible at events, gathering places and engaging with department heads and leaders. It is apparent she has an open-door policy and she listens to the ideas and concerns of the staff and students alike.
- According to the select group of individuals spoken with, the president has established a positive campus climate.
- I can attest to the positive tone and climate that the President has established on campus. The President has fostered an inclusive, collaborative, and forward-

## Trustees' Feedback -Overview of Presidential Evaluation

thinking environment where all members of the community feel valued and heard. This culture emphasizes respect, diversity, and shared responsibility, creating a strong sense of unity and purpose.

- Very Positive tone. The student body is very comfortable with her.

### **The President's communication with the campus, the Board and others**

- 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.
- The President consistently informs the Board of significant issues, such as the recent Title IX communication. This topic is of paramount importance for higher education leaders. The communication was clear, concise, timely, and comprehensive. Based on my brief tenure with the Board, I believe the President effectively communicates with us.
- 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 stake holders. She is now the president of "Council of Presidents," not an easy task due to her abilities and thoughtfulness and communication skills. 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 other higher education stake holders is "Linda is a GEM."
- The President's communication with the campus, the Board and others. All levels of the organization feel President Thompson is genuine in her communication and transparent on appropriate topics. What comes across is that she is student centered and also understands the faculty, staff, cabinet and the BOD varying needs for communication. President Thompson has diverse experience that provides practical strategies to get things done. There is a shared sense that things are much better than they were 3 years ago and Linda is a large part of driving that.
- The President's communications, mostly via email, have been clear and concise relative to what's happening on campus and her interface with various constituents, It would be helpful to receive her written reports to the Board prior to the meetings, as they are usually quite lengthy and presented orally. However,

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accompanying slide presentations depicting many of the activities and accomplishments happening on campus as well as other occurrences associated with WSU events, opportunities, trips, etc. are quite helpful. Oftentimes, much of what is read aloud is sometimes challenging to remember after a lengthy oral presentation.

- I can confidently state that the President's communication with the campus, the Board, and other key stakeholders has been highly effective. The President maintains open, transparent, and consistent lines of communication, ensuring that information is shared in a timely and clear manner. This has fostered a culture of trust and collaboration across the campus community.
- Very open and always available to speak to. She is very visible on campus and communicates with students.

### **The President's effectiveness as a leader to develop an effective team and setting measurable goals (KPI's) for this team.**

- I do not yet have enough background or personal experience to provide an adequate answer.
- The President has made difficult, but necessary personnel-related decisions within the past fiscal year that puts the University and its students first. New Cabinet members added in the last fiscal year have brought positive energy to the campus – something we have not seen in quite some time. The Cabinet now appears to be working cohesively, which is a positive sign for the institution. 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. The restructuring of Institutional Research under the guidance of the President and Provost is another positive development in this area.
- Linda Thompson is a visionary. She has ideas that are grand. She is collaborating with her team to put in place the new Strategic Plan that is consistent with the values and traditions of WSU, yet innovative. Linda Thompson 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 PA are the future of the University. The traditional student body is in decline due to demographic changes. That is a fact. Therefore, innovative approaches, new visions and innovative programs are needed to carry the university for another 185 years. Dr. Thompson is collaborating diligently with her team to implement the KPI's needed to evaluate and monitor the progress of the campus.

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- Dr. Thompson is a visionary. She has introduced many of these ideas to the campus. She at times has faced resistance to these ideas. Not because the ideas are not possible to put into action, rather because people do not want to change or not want to get out of their comfort zone. It is because of this reason that she may want to consider channeling these ideas through a Think Tank, which can evaluate the market acceptability, the resource and facility availability for these ideas.
- The President's effectiveness as a leader to develop an effective team and setting measurable goals (KPI's) for this team. I am truly excited about the hires that President Thompson has made to fill her cabinet. The talent she has hired are skilled, experienced professionals. It is early days and the cabinet needs time to jell and begin to execute common goals and objectives. This is an excellent opportunity for President Thompson. Our level of KPI's historically is not adequate and I look forward to President Thompson addressing this challenge in the coming years.
- The team that the President has selected to assist her with establishing meaningful goals are extremely hardworking, capable individuals who help to lift the value of the work necessary to establish and bring the established goals to fruition.
- I would like to affirm that the President has demonstrated strong leadership in both developing an effective team and setting measurable goals. Through a collaborative and inclusive approach, the President has cultivated a cohesive team that works well together, leveraging diverse skills to achieve common objectives.
- President Thompson has put together an outstanding team and has been effective in reaching her goals.

### **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 these.**

- I anticipate that with increased experience, I will be better equipped to assess the President's ability to articulate a clear agenda and priorities aligned with the University's Strategic Plan and to develop effective strategies for achieving them. While I was unable to attend the Board retreat due to prior commitments, I have thoroughly reviewed the 2019-2024 Strategic Plan and watched the 2024 State of the University. Based on my current understanding and the support of the consulting firm, I am confident in President Thompson's capacity to deliver a comprehensive plan that addresses the priorities outlined in the new 2025-2030 Strategic Plan.
- The President's agenda has aligned (to the extent possible) with the 2019-2024 Strategic Plan. Her agenda for the year has been clear to the campus community

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through both oral and written communications, including the State of the Campus Address. Her vision is articulated through four broad themes:

1. Westfield State University must be a destination for high achieving people.
  2. Westfield State University must be an organization that values equity, diversity, and inclusion.
  3. Westfield State University must be an organization that acts locally and thinks globally.
  4. Westfield State University must be an organization that is financially sustainable.
- Her agenda has been bought into across the campus and aligns well with the three strategic priorities that came out of the three-day retreat for the Strategic Planning Committee. Strategies have been developed within each division that aligns with these four broad themes. The new Strategic Plan should amplify these strategies and serve as a springboard for future decision-making.
  - 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 adhering 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 clear, identifiable strategies to achieve these. I am impressed with President Thompsons strategic thinking and ability to envision new ideas that can drive the University forward. It is important that she prioritizes and clearly communicate the difference between ideation and goals the broader team should execute on.
  - With the support of the majority of WSU constituents and the community-at-large, the current Strategic Plan was developed with clear goals. However, as we are developing a new plan, it is yet unclear as to the pathway to achieve some of the goals.
  - I can confidently state that the President has effectively articulated a clear and focused agenda that aligns seamlessly with the University's Strategic Plan. The President has prioritized key areas that are critical to the institution's growth and

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sustainability, ensuring that these priorities resonate with the long-term vision of the University.

- The president has exceeded her priorities as it relates to the University's strategy plan.

### **The President's effectiveness as a representative of the University to the broader community.**

- I do not yet have enough background or personal experience to provide an adequate answer.
- The President has been well-received externally. 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 with the Republic of Ireland. For instance, her connection with a local accounting firm and invitation to meet with faculty, staff, and students on-campus along with the Superintendent of Westfield Public Schools has spurred the potential development of a new Westfield Promise course in accounting to augment the pipeline of accounting students.
- Although she may be effective in this area of external engagement, her brightest spot is her connections with prospective and current donors. Her level of enthusiasm for Westfield State University, her articulation of her vision for the future of the institution, and her ability to connect with donors of all types is admirable. Her continued presence at alumni gatherings, fundraising events, and private donors will only make the efforts of the Westfield State University Foundation more successful.
- All I hear across the State is that she is a "GEM." Community leaders within the city, other University Presidents, Donors and supports 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 on 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.
- President Thompson is doing a great job representing the University to Westfield, Western Ma. This shows up in her leadership with the council of University Presidents and the many programs and initiatives with Westfield and Springfield.
- She represents WSU well in the medical community. Serving as a Board member of Baystate Hospital is an influential role in promoting WSU in the nursing and mental health fields. That connection is invaluable to the broader community

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I believe that the President is making strides in her interface with the business community. I'm not clear about the social connections and influence in the broader community that have influenced an increased enrollment of undergrad or graduate students.

- I would like to highlight the President's outstanding effectiveness as a representative of the University to the broader community. The President has consistently served as a strong and articulate ambassador, fostering meaningful relationships with key stakeholders, including alumni, donors, local leaders, and governmental bodies. Through active engagement, the President has elevated the University's profile, ensuring it is seen as a vital and contributing member of the broader community. This has not only enhanced the institution's reputation but also opened new opportunities for partnerships and support, reinforcing the University's mission and impact.
- Outstanding ambassador of Westfield University to the community and all of western MA.

### **The President's effectiveness in supporting BHE system-wide priorities including the Equity Agenda (issues of affordability, access, closing achievement gaps, wraparound support services).**

- I do not yet have enough background or personal experience to provide an adequate answer.
- The President has been committed to all aspects of the Board of Higher Education's Equity Agenda. On the four issues noted, the President has done the following:
- Issues of Affordability & Access: The President has worked with the Division of Institutional Advancement to conceptualize a comprehensive capital campaign focused on student access (which is 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.
- Closing Achievement Gaps & Wraparound Support Services: The President has noted that addressing NECHE areas of concern, including the widening achievement gap, are a top priority for her. The initiatives launched under the Interim Provost and new permanent Provost, including the increased use of WSU360 and introduction of a dual advising program, should assist in these efforts. The President has also been committed to uplifting successful current strategies in this area, including the LEAD Scholars Program, which has one of the highest retention rates of any program or service on campus.



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- Dr. Thompson has worked diligently to address the agenda set forth by BHE.
- Significant steps were taken to address the issue of affordability with offering of additional need based financial aid to students and offering it earlier than previous years, results are higher transfer students and first year students and improved retention.
- 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. 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.
- It is clear in speaking with President Thompson that she is a driver/supporter of the Equity initiative at WSU. There have been starts and stops on this initiative at the University. The data challenges above as well as leadership and ownership challenges leave this as an opportunity to improve.
- It's important that the BHE agenda be fully implemented for all aspects of the university. Without constant review and up-to-date data, we can surmise that it is effectively implemented.
- Hiring practices must be reviewed and analyzed in the big picture. Equity and access opportunities for all should be a visible priority. Leadership (Cabinet) should be more reflective of the diversity that we are striving to acquire. An equity audit of each of the aforementioned categories will provide a clearer portrait of the effectiveness of the implementation of the BHE's Equity Agenda.
- It is important that Black and Brown students, faculty, and staff members have greater representation on campus to reflect the edit within the BHE Equity Agenda.
- I can affirm that the President has been highly effective in supporting the Board of Higher Education's system-wide priorities, particularly with regard to the Equity Agenda. The President has shown a strong commitment to advancing issues of affordability and access, implementing initiatives that help ensure education is more attainable for all students. Additionally, the President has worked diligently to close achievement gaps, focusing on equity-driven solutions that provide meaningful wraparound support services.
- The President has achieved all of the BHE priorities.

### **Other Comments and observations.**

- From everything that I have seen, heard, and read, it seems as if President Thompson has not only satisfied the requirements of the position but has exceeded them. As I am just embarking on my five-year appointment, I do not

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have much personal experience to go on and must rely on first impressions and the words of others. I am happy to elaborate or answer any other questions that you may have.

- The President has continued to be highly visible across campus, student-centered, and a positive force for change on campus. With a united Cabinet behind her and a campus community buying into her vision with each passing day, the President is poised for continued success.
- Dr. Thompson is the right person at the right time and the right place. She is the stable and initiative-taking leader that the university has needed for a long time. A uniter, not a Divider. We are lucky to have her on our campus and as our President.
- Like any other leader there are areas that there may be opportunities for reimagination or consideration. I suppose Dr. Thompson may consider forming a Think Tank to have the ideas that are discussed at the cabinet level vetted and analyzed. Are they feasible, are they practical? Are the Human resources and physical resources available to make these ideas reality and make them executable?
- I would also consider cabinet level performance reviews annually and exchanging positive feed backs were needed and providing opportunity for Improvements to them. As well as encouraging the cabinet members to do the same for their direct reports. The feedback may be nurturing and constructive, so the team gets directions on expectations, accountability, areas of strength and weaknesses as well.
- The Chairman of the Board is an effective communicator and very transparent in sharing information with other Board members.
- Greater personal interface with the president to know about important occurrences, before they are presented to the community-at-large would be appreciated. For example, oftentimes, information is received from members of the faculty and/or staff about changes and new hires; 2 recent top-level leaders were "introduced" by email to the WSU community prior to a Board meeting when the formal introduction occurred. It's my personal opinion that information should have been forthcoming prior to a general announcement to the campus community. Transparency is important.
- More attention should be given to the diversity implementation plan. It's important to lead the discussion in challenging and tough conversations around race and equity and their impact pact on the University as a whole. Suggestion: Engage an outside consulting firm to assist with this topic.

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- President Thompson is a visionary leader, who has been effective in initiating change at the University. President Thompson has a clear vision of the future, has communicated it clearly, and has had success in setting a new direction for the organization. Her themes (eg., IDEAS) allow her to effectively communicate her vision to the Board; her cabinet; the faculty, staff, and librarians; and the university community as a whole. I am looking forward to the launch of the new strategic plan, which should provide a framework to advance our progress.
- President Thompson is quietly confident. Her leadership style emphasizes optimism, creativity, empathy, humility, authenticity, and personal connection. She welcomes feedback, is an active listener, and values diverse viewpoints.
- President Thompson is resilient. While the University faces some challenges (chief among them declining enrollment and the resulting financial strain), President Thompson tackles these challenges head-on. She is not deterred by adversity; instead, these challenges strengthen her resolve. President Thompson's unwavering commitment to and the University and all of its constituencies has been a stabilizing force.
- President Thompson is a champion of innovation. She has the courage and confidence to take risks and try new things, while also inspiring the team to do the same. You cannot cut your way to prosperity, and President Thompson has been successful in promoting optimism, creativity, innovation, and new ideas.
- The President has been successful in building collaborations both within the University, and as well with the broader community. The examples of this are too numerous to mention, but I believe that the time and energy that she has personally committed to "bridge building" has improved the standing of the University among many, many constituencies. While much progress has been made, there is still an opportunity to improve the university's culture, to build trust, to lower the reactivity of some people or groups, and to bring those who have resisted change into the fold.

Westfield State University

Individuals or Groups interviewed by Trustees.

**Feedback from Participants will be  
treated as confidential.**

August 15-September 15, 2024

	Individual or Group to be Interviewed per protocol by selected Trustees:
AS/MA	The Campus President Self-evaluation August 2024
MA/TJ A	Academic chairs September 2024
GG/TJ B	Union leadership (MSCA)and combined (APA and AFSCME) September 2024
AS/GW C	A group of five to eight community or regional leaders Shukla , Rick Sullivan, Andy Artenstein, Tom Flaherty, Kevin Queenin, August 2024
GW/GG D	staff, selected at random (AFSCME and APA) September 2024
AS/MA E	State Senator and one Assemblyman or Representative who are familiar with the College/University and Mayor of Westfield, MA August 2024
MA/GW F	A group of eight mid-level administrators from diverse units selected at random (APA & NUP) August 2024
GG/AS G	The President's Cabinet August 2024
TJ/GW H	Six elected members of Student Government Association, plus student representatives from athletics, student clubs, and residential and commuter students September 2024
GW/TJ I	Members of the leadership of the Board of Trustees of Alumni Association and Foundation August 2024
GG/MA J	Governance Committees of Faculty September 2024
GW/TJ K	A group of six-12 faculty from diverse academic units selected at random. September 2024
MA/AS L	Academic deans
AS/GG M	Group of Presidents from Sister institutions (Barry Maloney. Vincent Padon, Framingham State) ????

9/15	<b>Send Individual Reports to Brittney Kraus</b>
9/22	<b>Ali and Melissa work with Brittney to tabulate, along with board evaluation of the president and president's self-evaluation. Reports will be sent to Brittney anonymously with no names and will be kept confidential</b>
9/26	<b>Report submitted to the board</b>

- 1) The feedback will be held confidential, and no names will be used in oral or written reports.
- 2) Participants also will be asked to keep the feedback confidential.
- 3) The trustees involved with each group will not share or collaborate their reports with other trustees.
- 4) The trustees involved with each group will prepare a report of their findings and will send it to the Board assistant for tabulation.
- 5) Once all the reports are in and the board assistant has tabulated the results, the Chair and Vice chair of the board will author the final report based on the findings.
- 6) This effort will require two days of on-site visits and an all-day effort.

#### Open Ended Questions

- A) **Academic Chairs** How is the culture, temper of the campus in General and your area? How do the vision and initiatives are flowing down or up and communicated? Are you more optimistic about the outlook now than you were three years ago?
- B) **Union Leadership (1 & 2) Academic Deans** How is the culture, temper of the campus in General and your area? How do the vision and initiatives are flowing down or up and communicated? Are you more optimistic about the outlook now than you were three years ago?
- C) **Community Leaders** Has the University been able to build a bridge with the community, local and regional stake holders? IS the president visible and build a relationship with your organization? What is your perception of the University?
- D) **Random Staff** How is the culture, temper of the campus in General and your area? How do the vision and initiatives are flowing down or up and communicated? Are you more optimistic about the outlook now than you were three years ago?
- E) **Local Government Officials:** Has the University been able to build a bridge with the community, local and regional stake holders? Is the president visible and build a relationship with your organization or constituents? What is your perception of the University?
- F) **Administrators:** How is the culture, temper of the campus in General and your area? How do the vision and initiatives are flowing down or up and communicated? Are you more optimistic about the outlook now than you were three years ago?
- G) **The President's Cabinet:** How are the cabinet meeting exchanges? Are the issues discussed freely and openly? Accountability and Responsibility? KPI's? Management skills of folks involved. Once issues discussed and decided does everyone fall in line?
- H) **SGA:** How does the University leadership or the President interact with the SGA? Are the students concerned heard? Is the President visible enough for the students? Can they freely interact with her?
- I) **Leadership of other Boards:** How is communication of the President with your board? IS the President visible and participative? Does the President listen and act upon issues discussed?
- J) **Random Faculty Members** How is the culture, temper of the campus in General and your area? How do the vision and initiatives are flowing down or up and communicated? Are you more optimistic about the

outlook now than you were three years ago?

- K) How is the culture, temper of the campus in General and your area? How do the vision and initiatives are flowing down or up and communicated? Are you more optimistic about the outlook now than you were three years ago?
- L) **Academic Deans** How is the culture, temper of the campus in General and your area? How do the vision and initiatives are flowing down or up and communicated? Are you more optimistic about the outlook now than you were three years ago?
- M) **Other State University Presidents:** How would assess the University's interaction with your organization? Collaboration, communication and advocacy for WSU and the State University system? Leadership Style and perception?

#### **Additional Potential Questions**

A,B,F, J, K) How well do you (and your colleagues...and your faculty, etc.) understand the direction and priorities of the president? What are the priorities? How has the president solicited input into direction/priorities?

Cabinet, Admins, Managers) Is the budget supportive of priorities and direction? Is the budget process clear and understood?

ALL) How do you see the president working with others? with her cabinet? with government and community leaders? with faculty? with students?

ALL) What are your concerns? How have they been dealt with?

ALL) Is the president supportive of diversity initiatives? to raise enrollment? to improve retention? to close achievement gaps?

ALL) Has the president been visible and accessible to you? in the community?

ALL) Are there issues (what issues) should the president communicate more about? Are you hearing enough from the president?

## 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

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 75<sup>th</sup> 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.**



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Ali R. Salehi, Chair

October 25, 2024

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Date



**Board of Trustees  
Executive Committee**

November 15, 2024

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**MOTION**

The Executive Committee recommends to the full Board:

To approve the presidential evaluation for the 2023-2024 academic year as presented to the Executive Committee on the above date, and the submission of said evaluation to the Commissioner of the Department of Higher Education.