Northeastern University
Faculty Senate

**TO**: Faculty Senate.
**SUBJECT**: 9_23_2026 Senate Minutes.

Present: Professors Alexis, Auguste, Bhutta, Boehm, Bormann, Chiou, Desnoyers, DiBattista, Dummit, Farkas, Gatterbauer, Hand, Hill, Hinerman, Hodeghatta, Homan, Ingemi, Jackson, Kahn, Kelley, Lamin, Lessard, Lorette, Magowan, Maheswaran, McCoy Dunkley, McGivney, Musselman, Muzny, Orr-Skirvin, Passas, Rejtar, Ruberti, Shrivastava, Sivak, Spencer, Walker J., Walker L., Young-Hong, Zellner.

Administrators: Sheahan, Alshawabkeh, Amidon, Jackson, Knapp, Sceppa, Thurman.

Absent: (Professors): Eckelman, Sobral-Campos, Zheng.

Absent: (Administrators):

Call To Order: 11:45 a.m.

Senate Chair, Dee Spencer, welcomed senators and President Aoun to the first senate meeting of the academic year.

I. President Aoun's Annual Address to the Senate

The President addressed the Senate on the current state of higher education and Northeastern University's strategic positioning. Key points included:

- A record number of Ivy League institutions went to their waiting lists this year and are simultaneously increasing enrollment, intensifying competitive overlap with the university's applicant pool.
- A number of tuition-dependent comprehensive research universities historically viewed as peer institutions are under significant financial strain and have resorted to aggressive tuition discounting to retain students; small colleges continue to face mergers, acquisitions, and closures.
- International student applications are declining nationally, driven in large part by a new federal immigration policy limiting international students to four years and by overall uncertainty over visa availability. The 4-year rule particularly affects PhD programs. On average, roughly 65% of STEM PhD students are international.
- Changes in federal oversight of NIH and NSF research grants add further uncertainty to the research funding environment.

- The university's differentiators remain its global campus network, its early leadership in shaping an AI-and-human-centered ("humanics") academic vision, and its leadership in experiential education and co-op, which peer institutions (including MIT and Harvard Business School) are now seeking to emulate.

- Also, Northeastern has created programs that do not exist in other universities like the combined majors that have been very attractive to students.

- Undergraduate applications remain among the highest of any private university, nationally. Graduate international applications have declined in line with (though less severely than) the national trend, an outcome attributed to the university's global campus network offering alternative locations of study for students unable to obtain U.S. visas.

- The president played a video from Gene Tunic proposing the creation of accelerated PhD programs alongside the traditional ones.

- New experiential, AI-infused academic programs are being developed for the Bay Area (engineering, design, and entrepreneurship), London, and New York (design, finance, fintech, and entertainment).

**QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION**:

- Professor Spencer, DMSB, said that our signature program is co-op and competing institutions are now utilizing co-op. How do we adapt to this challenge?

  The President described a move toward "experiential first, experiential throughout" curricula, including a community-sourced pipeline of roughly 8,000 employer projects annually that give students AI proficiency and applied experience before their first co-op placement, and a proposed "encore co-op" offering co-op opportunities to alumni for career reinvention.

  We also are the only university in the United States that has an experiential PhD program.

- Professor Hinerman, BCHS, asked the President to elaborate on the value of the global network for faculty.

  The President cited examples of faculty recruited to and relocating among global campuses (including Europe, the Bay Area, Miami/Central Florida, and New York) for research and teaching opportunities and encouraged faculty interested in mobility opportunities to speak with their deans.

- Professor Musselman, CSSH, said faculty and students feel disconnected and scattered. She asked the President to elaborate on his vision of a human-centered university.

  The President encouraged faculty and students to proactively bring ideas to their deans rather than wait to be invited, citing the growth of more than 500 student-run clubs as an example of bottom-up initiative.

**II. SAC REPORT** (The SAC report has been posted to the Senate website.)

Senate Chair Spencer, DMSB, noted that since the last senate meeting SAC has met 15 times. SAC hosted one Elected Senators meeting and met with the provost 9 times. SAC formed and charged 11 committees based on faculty concerns and priorities.

Professor Spencer introduced Interim Provost Tom Sheahan. She noted that he has been receptive to faculty concerns and has maintained an open line of communication.

**III. PROVOST REPORT**

- Work from the spring working groups and the August leadership retreat continues to inform development of the university's academic plan.
- A draft academic plan is expected by mid-to-late fall, with submission to the Board of Trustees for consideration and approval in December.
- The provost provided an update on two dean searches.
    - The COE search is further along. An initial slate has been interviewed, and recommendations for on-campus interviews have been submitted to the provost.
    - The DMSB search is expected to complete its initial interview stage within approximately one week.
- He thanked Jerry Hajar (Interim Dean, COE) and Emery Trahan (Interim Dean, DMSB) for their service, and thanked James Hackney and Beth Mynatt for chairing the DMSB and COE search committees, respectively.
- A search is underway for a Vice Provost for Research Development.
- The Dublin Innovation Institute is now operational and providing faculty with access to European research funding.
- The provost has formed a working group with Sr. Vice President, Mary Strother, General Counsel's Office and Sr. Vice President, Bret Sweet, Finance and Administration to address longstanding faculty concerns regarding research procurement and contracting support.

**QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION**

- Professor Anna Lamin, DMSB, asked if new combined majors had been paused.

    Provost Sheahan stated that no pause has been implemented, but noted that a review of low- or no-enrollment combined majors is warranted.

- Professor Paul Chiou, DMSB, asked about plans for new academic programs in New York.

The provost described continuing teach-out of legacy Marymount Manhattan majors, new performing arts programs (dance, musical theater, acting), and the Global Business and Innovation Program in development, noting that the university is in the process of amending its New York charter to add master's-level programs.

IV. The 4_22_26 minutes were approved by unanimous consent.

**V. PRESENTATION**

**DIANE LEVIN, UNIVERSITY OMBUDS.**

(The presentation has been posted to the senate website.)

**UPDATE FROM THE OMBUDS OFFICE: FY2026 TRENDS AND EMERGING FY2027 THEMES.**

Diane Levin, Ombuds for Faculty and Staff, presented her annual report, reviewing FY2026 patterns and emerging FY2027 themes. As a reminder, the Ombuds Office is confidential, independent, impartial/unaligned, and informal (not an office of notice or record).

**FY2026 OVERVIEW**

- 458 individuals visited the office in FY2026: a record year (average is approximately 400/year): 64% staff, 29% faculty, and 15% from the global network (up 2 percentage points from FY2025).

- 34% of visitors were repeat visitors returning with a new matter, which Ms. Levin characterized as a positive sign that people are seeking help earlier in the life cycle of a concern.

- The top three concern categories, consistent with prior years since the COVID period, were:

    a. organizational and leadership issues (with faculty focused on relationships with academic leaders and communication transparency, and staff focused on operational/organizational change and workload);

    b. evaluative relationships, including goal setting, performance expectations, and feedback timing, an area affecting 50% of all office visitors over Ms. Levin's nine-plus years in the role; and

    c. community values, ethics, and standards.

- Notable increases in FY2026 included:

    a. a 38% rise in concerns related to administrative services and processes (timeliness, responsiveness, and clarity of decision-making criteria);
    b. a spike in benefits-related concerns (10% of all visitors) concentrated around the January rollout of the new pharmacy benefits program; and

    c. roughly one in four staff visitors expressing concern about a lack of career advancement opportunities at the university.

**RISK TRACKING**

- 133 visitors in FY2026 (a third of whom were faculty) identified concerns they explicitly connected to institutional risk or exposure, tracked across five categories:
    a. workforce,
    b. legal/compliance
    c. strategic
    d. reputational
    e. financial

- These visitors identified 317 discrete "risk signals," roughly double the prior year's total (a 51% increase), even though the number of visitors reporting risk was roughly flat year over year (130 in FY2025 vs. 133 in FY2026).

- Workforce risk signals (e.g., retention, absenteeism, morale, team dynamics) rose to the top category and doubled over the prior year.

**EMERGING FY2027 THEMES**

- Broad anxiety about the higher education environment surfaces even in conversations unrelated to that topic.

- A continued, strong desire for direct, transparent, and consistent communication from leadership.

- Continued concerns regarding administrative services, with visitors indicating these functions would benefit from additional staffing and resources.

**QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION**

- Professor Homan, COS, asked whether these themes are shared with HR?

    Diane Levin confirmed that aggregating and sharing themes with relevant offices is a core part of her role.

- Professor DiBattista, COS, asked for examples of what constitutes a reportable risk.

    Diane Levin gave illustrative (non-case-specific) examples of workforce risk (such as a manager whose team is experiencing a high rate of turnover) and financial risk (such as business practices resulting in avoidable financial loss).

The meeting adjourned at 1:10 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Professor Cecelia Musselman, CSSH
Senate Secretary