

**NINTH SENATE REVIEW COMMISSION
THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 2026
232 ENGLISH BUILDING
MINUTES**

Present: Chair Nolan Miller, Nizam Arain, Hunter Farnham, Michael Grossman, Eric Kurt, Beth Meschewski (Zoom), Kirsten Pullen, Jenny Roether, Carol Symes, Joyce Tolliver, Jess Williams

Absent: Jenny Amos

1. CALL TO ORDER

A regular meeting of the Ninth Senate Review Commission (SR9) was called to order at 11:00 am with Chair Miller presiding.

2. PUBLIC COMMENT

No requests received.

3. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

The minutes of the February 12, 2026 meeting were approved as distributed.

4. CHAIR'S REMARKS

Without objection, SR9 voted to allow remote participation by Meschewski.

Chair Miller shared an email from the Office of the Chancellor that was sent to Jon Hale, Chair *pro tempore*, Senate Committee on Honorary Degrees (HD). The email was in response to HD sending an honorary degree award nomination to the Office of the Chancellor for preliminary review.

Tolliver thanked Chair Miller for his work on leading the commission. She was also pleased SR9 voted unanimously in support of the proposed Joint Advisory Committee on Honorary Degrees (JACHD). Chair Miller replied he has been impressed by the thoughtfulness and engagement of SR9.

5. OLD BUSINESS

a) Establish the Process for Collecting Feedback

No new discussion.

b) SR.26.01, Review of the Honorary Degree Award Process

Chair Miller stated some items currently being characterized as Senate matters are, in fact, structural requirements under the Illinois Open Meetings Act (OMA). He noted the difficulty of working through complex issues in an OMA setting, particularly within a

body that meets once a month for two hours, includes many participants, operates under regimented procedures, and has limited ability to pause and reconvene. He suggested that a Joint Advisory Committee on Honorary Degrees (JACHD) would allow for greater flexibility in deliberation.

While Chair Miller emphasized the importance of protecting candidate privacy, he also observed that even if Senate discussions were conducted privately, the structure of a Senate meeting is not well suited to thoroughly work through complicated matters.

Grossman asked if any consideration has been given that moving honorary degree awards to a JACHD format could create a slippery slope for the future of other committees. Chair Miller replied any such change would require the approval of the Senate. Chair Miller also stated SR9 should anticipate that the Senate may not be fully supportive of a JACHD recommendation.

Arain pointed to the recommendation for annual monitoring and a holistic structural review after three to five years as possibly reassuring.

Tolliver noted recommendations from SR9 should be presented as a more thoughtful, robust process that the Senate is still in control of, in terms of selecting the slate for the JACHD. Williams stated focus should also be placed on the strengthening of the criteria process.

Chair Miller shared that members of HD have debated whether part of their role is to defend a nomination on the Senate floor. From the discussions, it has been clear SR9 believes the responsibility of HD is to make a substantive nomination, while the sponsors of the nomination are responsible for defending it before the Senate.

Arain suggested adding a component to the criteria discussion for nominators: Does this choice fulfill the principles, gains, and goals of the honorary degree award? Framing the evaluation this way would place the nomination in a broader institutional context, rather than focusing solely on individual opinions about the candidate.

Grossman stated the committee evaluating candidates are capable of judging them. He shared that different people have different ideas on personal integrity and does not believe personal integrity should be included.

Chair Miller noted he was leaning toward including language addressing integrity. While it may not be possible to prevent such concerns from arising in discussion, he suggested it would be helpful to provide guidance on how those issues should be considered.

In the JACHD model an executive committee from the nominating college would participate in preliminary vetting. Tolliver added that, in outlining the process, the document should include language reminding members of the executive committee to be mindful that nominating a candidate whose documented conduct could expose the institution to criticism is unlikely to be successful. She emphasized that this consideration should be raised early in the conversation.

Pullen noted that one of the recommendations she and Symes put forward was that external letters should not be included in the vetting process. She expressed the view that letters submitted internally provide a greater degree of scrutiny, as internal reviewers are more likely to know the candidate and understand the campus context.

Chair Miller shared that when the failed nomination went to the Senate for a vote, the opposition should have been anticipated and responses prepared, but this did not occur. Having an executive committee sign off on nominations, and having broader internal support would help to figure out much earlier on if there are issues. It was clear that there was a lot of opposition and no one who was part of the process believed it was part of their job to address that.

Pullen noted, as a member of the Senate Committee on Educational Policy (EP), there have been multiple times she did not agree with a proposal, but voted to send it forward to the Senate for a vote, because she understood that was a way for the senators to have discussion. She also referenced a comment made by Pollyanna Rhee, faculty committee member, HD, when she attended the February 12, 2026 SR9 meeting. Rhee stated her view is that HD is endorsing process and completeness of recommendations. Pullen stated if that continues to be the case, then what happened at the Senate during the failed nomination will continue to happen. Pullen emphasized the need for broader internal support.

Tolliver stated making it explicit that there is a substantive review expectation for the JACHD would parallel how the Joint Advisory Committee on Investment, Licensing, and Naming Rights (JACILNR) works.

Arian noted if the decision is entrusted to the Senate, and the principle is that this constitutes a valid method of collective representation, there is no way to control how informed individual senators may be. However, a shared body of knowledge can be provided to support their deliberation. Replicating the same level of preparatory information and background in that context would be challenging. Chair Miller added that Model B attempts to address this concern by increasing the amount of information provided.

Chair Miller turned to the two proposed models:

- Model A with a final recommendation by a JACHD and a Report for Information is sent to the Senate.
- Model B with a final recommendation by the Senate.

Chair Miller inquired if both models should be forwarded, should one model be endorsed, or should both be sent forward without a recommendation from SR9. Tolliver replied the job of SR9 is to forward a recommendation. The discussions of SR9 should also be reflected in the summary to show how thorough and thoughtful the deliberations have been and to show if there was a majority on SR9 that leaned towards one model or the other. Tolliver stated neither model should be eclipsed and that SR9 should forward the strongest version of both plans. She also noted it could appear that SR9 was at an impasse if there is not a clear recommendation from SR9.

Kurt requested clarification on the process. Chair Miller replied SR9 is charged with delivering a report to the Senate Executive Committee (SEC) and the SEC decides what to do with it. The SEC could refer it to the Senate Committee on University Statutes and Senate Procedures (SP) to start making changes to the *Bylaws*. Another option is the SEC could take it to the Senate floor for discussion and a vote.

SR9 agreed to an anonymous straw poll to gauge sentiment before discussing any recommendation. Eight voted for Model A and three voted for Model B, with one member absent.

Williams stated if the role of the JACHD is to analyze professional standards, she believes it is important that the Senate retains the ability to weigh in on questions of integrity.

Kurt observed that Model A may be a harder sell, and there was general agreement Model B should be strengthened as much as possible. Pullen emphasized the Senate should see the vote of SR9 on both models.

Tolliver stated shared governance does not mean only the Senate votes in open session on every matter. She noted the University Senates Conference (USC) regularly meets with the President and Vice President for candid discussions that do not result in votes but influence policy.

Chair Miller remarked that shared governance does not mean each party gets what it wants at all times. Rather, it requires trust in colleagues and recognition of their expertise.

Tolliver stated it needs to be emphasized, under Model A, honorary degree awards are still within the purview of the Senate. The Senate input would occur at the outset, in selecting members of the JACHD, rather than at the conclusion of the process.

Chair Miller noted under Model A, while there cannot be a final vote to reject the candidate at the meeting when the report is received from JACHD, if the Senate opposed a candidate a resolution could be drafted for consideration at the next Senate meeting. Tolliver added that Senate discussions are public record, and if a recommendation proceeds, there will be documentation of the Senate floor discussion, even if no formal vote occurs.

Arain stated that part of the charge for SR9 is to consider ways to improve the effectiveness and public image of the Senate, including how it is perceived in managing, delegating, and fulfilling its responsibilities. If it is the belief of SR9 that Model A provides a more effective structure for honorary degree award decisions, it could be viewed as strengthening the institutional role of the Senate.

Tolliver responded that the reputation of the Senate was damaged when the nomination for an honorary degree award candidate failed, and the stakes in these decisions are high.

Chair Miller stated that Model B may be more likely to succeed since it is closer to the current process. Under Model B, the JACHD would conduct a substantive evaluation and forward the nominee to the SEC, which would then place the item on a Senate agenda for a first reading. Chair Miller inquired whether SR9 should recommend a mandatory first reading without a vote. Williams questioned whether SR9 has authority to make such a requirement mandatory. Chair Miller responded that it might require a change in the Standing Rules or *Bylaws* to make it truly mandatory, and the SEC would refer any desired changes to SP to implement. Arain suggested a first reading should be presumptive.

Tolliver indicated there may be cases in which the SEC determines that two Senate readings are advisable and others when the determination is that two readings are not essential, and opposed making a first reading mandatory. She noted if a mandatory first reading were required for honorary degree award nominations, similar requirements should apply to proposals from the Senate Committee on Educational Policy (EP), which are equally significant. She further stated that mandating a first reading could slow the process and that flexibility would be more productive.

Chair Miller stressed the importance of ensuring members are fully informed. He stated in the prior failed nomination, disputed facts were presented on the Senate floor without sufficient time for senators to conduct their own review. Proposed changes to the process like the first read and written question period are designed to help prevent this.

Under Model B, SR9 agreed the SEC should know the name of the candidate before placing the nomination on the Senate agenda.

Under Model B, SR9 agreed the first reading should be strongly recommended but left to SEC's ordinary agenda-setting duties.

Chair Miller noted that, in an effort to illustrate a highly deliberative process under Model B, the write up includes language requiring a mandatory first reading, followed by a period for collecting written questions. These could be removed but they are included to make the possibility clear. The sponsor would respond to those questions, and the nomination would then return to the Senate for a final vote. SEC could choose not to include them, but it is important to see how they might look.

SR9 agreed on an early fall deadline for honorary degree nominations to align with commencement planning timelines, recognizing that the commencement speaker may, at times, also be a recipient of an honorary degree award.

Chair Miller adjourned the meeting for the day at 12:30 pm and stated the meeting will be reconvened on February 20, 2026 at 1:00 pm.

Chair Miller reconvened the meeting on February 20, 2026 at 1:00 pm. In attendance were Chair Miller, Arain, Farnham, Grossman, Kurt, Meschewski, Roether, Symes, Tolliver, and Williams.

In a previous discussion, it was suggested the Provost serve as chair of the JACHD. Upon further reflection, Chair Miller recommended maintaining a faculty member as chair.

Roether clarified that her earlier suggestion was that the Office of the Provost provide staff support, and the Chancellor serve in an advisory capacity by naming a designee from the Office of the Chancellor. SR9 agreed that the Provost should not act as chair.

Chair Miller agreed if JACHD recommendations are forwarded to the Office of the Chancellor, a designee of the Chancellor should serve on the JACHD. He noted the Director of Special Events currently fills an *ex officio* seat on HD. Roether explained that

this is primarily due to the role of commencement. If honorary degree awards were decoupled from commencement, there would still be an award ceremony. In that case, the Director of Special Events would not need an *ex officio* seat on the JACHD but the Office of the Chancellor should still have representation.

Tolliver observed in Section III, number 6, second bullet point, “administrative designee” should be plural. SR9 agreed the JACHD should include substantive representation from the administration. Tolliver referenced the three *ex officio* seats on the Senate Committee on General University Policy (GP) and stated that including multiple perspectives is beneficial.

Roether noted the chair of JACILNR is elected annually by that committee. Grossman suggested the JACHD follow a similar process, with the chair elected from among its elected members. Tolliver stated that, in the case of search committees, separate elections are held for potential chairs. Two names are forwarded to the Office of the Chancellor, both individuals are appointed to the committee, and the Chancellor designates the chair.

Meschewski agreed the JACHD should elect its chair but disagreed that the chair should be limited to faculty. She stated that an academic professional (AP) could represent honorary degree awards effectively, noting that APs are engaged in research and understand the merits of scholarly and professional achievement.

Chair Miller responded that expanding eligibility beyond faculty would be a difficult sell given that honorary degrees are seen as degrees. Chair Miller, Grossman, Roether, and Symes agreed the chair should be a faculty member. Chair Miller further stated that given the conflicts that have arisen, the position should be held by a tenured faculty member, and Symes concurred.

Arain noted that recommending a faculty member as chair may help address symbolic concerns about relinquishing shared governance or faculty authority. He suggested that the chair carries a degree of influence and symbolic value and supports designating the role for faculty.

Kurt, speaking as chair of the Council of Academic Professionals (CAP), expressed support for diverse leadership representation. He stated that APs are fully capable of serving as chair of the JACHD and acknowledged that while broadening eligibility may be politically challenging, that alone should not preclude considering the option.

SR9 agreed the chair should be someone who is elected to the JACHD and not one appointed to the JACHD by the Chancellor. SR9 decided not to restrict the position to a faculty member but to leave it to JACHD to decide on the best person to serve as chair in any given year.

Chair Miller moved to what would happen to HD under the proposed changes. Would it shift to evaluating criteria, or would a separate standing committee be needed for that purpose? Farnham noted that Bylaws, Part D.5.13.a state, "The Committee shall initiate and review nominations for honorary degrees and make recommendations to the Senate." Under the proposed model, those responsibilities would transfer to the JACHD rather than remain with HD. Tolliver stated it would not make sense to create a separate committee solely to evaluate criteria.

Roether suggested that current members of HD should be considered for service on the JACHD. She described the proposal as a transition from HD to a new, more robust structure. Arain agreed and stated that framing the proposal as a transition of HD to a strengthened structure would be helpful. Tolliver clarified it should be framed as HD consulting during the transition. SR9 viewed HD as having an important role in the transition and that the future of HD would be best evaluated after the transition takes place.

SR9 reviewed the honorary degree recommendations document developed by Pullen and Symes. The rationale outlined in that document will be incorporated into the proposal. Grossman noted that, in the first paragraph's final line, he would suggest the phrase "express the academic values of the university community." Meschewski disagreed and stated the University holds values beyond those that are strictly academic. Tolliver suggested using the term "mission" instead.

The Pullen and Symes document recommended greater consultation within a college before a nomination advances beyond that level, including review by a college executive committee and the solicitation of internal letters of support. The intent is to build stronger internal support before seeking external letters, with external letters remaining optional. They also suggested that letters from other campus units could demonstrate broader institutional support. SR9 agreed to incorporate these recommendations.

The importance of a respectful and more robust front-end process was emphasized. Chair Miller noted the tension between confidentiality during the review process and the fact that, at the final stage, deliberations cannot remain confidential if brought before the Senate.

Arain stated the recommendation to the SEC should clearly highlight a key difference between the two models, which is the degree of privacy each allows. He observed while many individuals favor increased privacy in deliberations, the two models do not provide the same latitude. He expressed concern if the ultimate decision rests with a larger voting body, priorities such as shared governance and faculty ownership of authority may outweigh privacy considerations. He emphasized the importance of clearly articulating in both models where privacy and public deliberation occur, acknowledging that both cannot be maximized simultaneously. He further stated if a perceived failure occurs and the process does not address underlying concerns, it would represent a missed opportunity.

Chair Miller reiterated that it may not be possible to simultaneously increase privacy while also having the Senate fully exercise its authority in public session. A public endpoint might necessitate less privacy earlier in the process to do the job well.

Tolliver noted the *Statutes* say “the Senate shall recommend.” The *Statutes* do not confer upon the Senate the authority to grant an honorary degree award. The Senate can fully use its power, which ends with the recommendation. In this case, the *Statutes* are silent on what happens between the Senate recommending a nomination and the Board of Trustees acting on it.

Kurt questioned what would occur if the Chancellor disagreed with a model approved by the SEC and the Senate. Chair Miller replied SR9 would report back to SEC and they could discuss recommendations with the Chancellor. Grossman noted there is plenty of opportunity for the Chancellor to weigh in as an *ex officio* on SEC.

SR9 agreed that statutory clarification is necessary to separate earned degrees from honorary degree awards. Chair Miller added that prior discussions had suggested an update to the Statutes might be required to delegate responsibility to recommend candidates to the JACHD, but in light of the *Statutes’* delegation clause he no longer believes that is necessary. He recommended keeping that language intentionally vague and referring the matter to SP to investigate.

In the models of honorary degree governance document, the table on page 13 will be used. Chair Miller suggested adding language that addresses privacy. He noted this could be written either as a standalone reference to privacy or framed more broadly in terms of dignity.

Arain observed the fifth line refers to the risk of a failed public vote and suggested incorporating language about privacy or dignity into that line. Chair Miller expressed

concern about how to frame the privacy issue and noted some may argue nominees are public figures and therefore not entitled to privacy in the usual sense. Tolliver suggested reframing the issue as “open public discussion on whether to award the degree.” Arain proposed using more nuanced language, such as “degree of privacy afforded to the candidate” consistent with the descriptive tone of columns two and three. Chair Miller emphasized that the language should be descriptive rather than normative. He suggested that Model A could state “private until forwarded to the Board of Trustees,” and Model B could state “private until brought before the SEC.” Tolliver suggested using “Senate” instead of “SEC.”

Roether recommended shifting the focus away from “privacy of the nominee,” noting that nominees are often public figures. Instead, she suggested emphasizing protection of the process, specifically the integrity of committee deliberations and the individuals serving on the committee. Tolliver strongly agreed and suggested the phrase “confidentiality of the process,” and Arain added “confidentiality of the vetting process.”

Chair Miller noted that under Model A, JACHD’s deliberations would never become public, just the final recommendation. Arain added that under Model A, deliberations would take place in private, with the identities of candidates becoming public at a designated point in the process.

With respect to Model B, members discussed clarifying the level of privacy surrounding deliberations and determining what information, if any, should eventually be made public. Questions raised included whether disclosure should apply only to recommended candidates, to individuals considered but not recommended, or to details of the discussions and the reasons for non-recommendation.

Chair Miller summarized that under Model A, deliberations would remain private, and the identities of candidates would be disclosed when forwarded to the Board of Trustees. Under Model B, both the deliberations and the identity of the candidate would become known once forwarded to the Senate. This would be added to the table.

Grossman noted the flow chart included a reference to “integrity,” but the term was not defined. SR9 agreed to remove the reference, as the JACHD would conduct a substantive evaluation of candidates and apply the established criteria, whatever they turned out to be.

Chair Miller observed that the recommendations have not yet been formally documented. He suggested incorporating them into either the full report or the

executive summary or a separate cover memo. The recommendations should include that SR9 unanimously agreed on the establishment of a JACHD and the straw poll sentiment in favor of Model A.

SR9 discussed preparing a final memorandum summarizing the major recommendations. Tolliver suggested that the cover memo include the number of meetings held, invited guests, and materials included in the appendix. She also recommended referencing both models and providing a summary of each.

Chair Miller noted the report from the ad hoc committee established by HD to review the honorary degree award process is currently being revised and that he believed SEC would receive it around the same time as the SR9 report. Tolliver added that the summary document should reflect that SR9 reviewed a draft version of that report.

Miller agreed to prepare revised documents to circulate before the final meeting on the HD process in one week.

c) SR.26.02, Ninth Senate Review Commission (SR9)

No new discussion.

6. NEW BUSINESS

No new business.

7. ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 2:30 pm on February 20, 2026.

Corazon Johnson
Committee Support Staff