



COP Remarks on Behalf of the State University System to the Board of Higher Education  
May 5, 2020

Chairman Gabrieli, Secretary Peyser, Commissioner Santiago and members of the Board of Higher Education, on behalf of the State Universities Council of Presidents, thank you for the opportunity to provide an update on the Massachusetts State University System.

I begin today by thanking you, Chairman Gabrieli, for your leadership and for actively partnering with our campuses to conduct an analysis to identify opportunities to further strengthen our system's financial position. It is incumbent upon us to ensure that our state universities are in the best possible position to continue our mission of offering Massachusetts resident's pathways to high-quality and affordable four-year degrees. With the pandemic creating financial havoc for families, workers, and industry, now more than ever, our commonwealth needs a strong public higher education system to aid in our state's economic recovery. Our campus' stand ready to work with you on this analysis.

I also want to thank Commissioner Santiago and Secretary Peyser for helping our campuses manage through the crisis by providing administrative support which has helped us to continue to deliver instruction to our 50,000+ state university students. When the seriousness of the COVID-19 virus became apparent and necessitated that on-campus instruction be transitioned to a remote format, the goals of our system were to ensure that academic integrity was maintained and that the disruption did not negatively impact our student's time to graduation. Aided by the Department and Executive Office, our faculty, staff, and students, have been able to successfully achieve this goal.

The DHE and EOE staff have been extraordinarily responsive to the needs of our campuses. In particular, we have received much needed assistance that has facilitated creative ways for our students to meet accrediting and licensing agency requirements, thus allowing for continued enrollment in teaching, nursing, occupational therapy, social work, engineering, and other experiential based academic programs.

Without this collaborative effort, we would not be able to report that we are on track to surpass last year's graduation numbers of 11,500 and look forward in the coming weeks to confer bachelor's and master's degrees to our deserving students. While over the past few years we've heard a lot about demographic challenges impacting higher education and degree shortages facing Massachusetts businesses, your state universities have responded by continuing to offering relevant degrees, closing achievement gaps and shortening time to graduation. We are

proud to note that over ninety percent of our graduates choose to live and work in the Commonwealth after graduation and positively contribute to the economic vitality of the state.

The month of May is traditionally a time when our campuses are full of life and excitement. Prospective students are participating in open-houses, our current students are completing their final exams, and seniors are planning with their families and friends for commencement ceremonies. However, due to the pandemic these celebrations have had to be postponed, or moved remotely. It saddens us that the nearly 12,000 graduates, many of whom are the first in their family to attend college and earn a degree, will not be able to walk across the commencement stage this month. However, our campuses have promised that student achievement will be recognized at a future date. On my campus, as an example, students will be recognized with a virtual celebration followed by individual virtual departmental events. Later in the year, when it's safe to do so, we will invite all students back to campus and celebrate more traditionally. I know similar plans are underway at all of the other campuses as well.

Although, we were successful in quickly transitioning our instruction and business operations to remote platforms, our students, staff and faculty have reported that they are anxious for the opportunity to work towards a safe return to in-classroom instruction this fall. The State University's, individually and as a system, are aggressively working on this return to campus which not only includes academics, but residence life, co-curricular activities and athletics. This planning work is being done collaboratively with both state and independent experts. President Javier Cevallos and I are pleased to be part of the Secretary's Higher Education Working Group; tasked as one of many industry verticals created to inform Governor Bakers Reopening Advisory Board.

We recognize that there are challenges to resuming on-campus activities, however, we do believe that it's in the best interest of our students and the Commonwealth that we begin that planning process now. Our hope and goal is to offer students an on-campus learning environment in the fall, but understand that we will need to have contingency plans in place to ensure our return to on-campus life is done in accordance with state and federal guidance; and assures a safe environment for the campus community and the surrounding area.

Since social-distancing orders were implemented ten weeks ago, our state universities have been working on many levels to combat this COVID-19 pandemic by partnering with municipal, regional and state agencies, medical centers, and hospitals to prepare for the expected medical surge. All of our campuses are currently providing direct or indirect support in this effort. We are committed to continuing to work with MEMA, DPH, area hospitals, health centers, municipalities and healthcare agencies to assist where needed during this crisis.

My colleagues and I are proud that many of our graduates are those heroes working on the front lines to combat this virus in area hospitals, medical centers, community clinics, nursing homes, and COVID-19 surge field hospitals. Our public higher education graduates make up a majority of our state's first responders, and other professionals battling this pandemic and we're grateful for the work that they're doing now and will continue to do in support of the Commonwealth.

As Massachusetts moves from responding to the immediate medical needs of our citizenry into the recovery phase of this pandemic, your state universities – and all of public higher education – will be an essential component of the Commonwealth’s physical and economic recovery. I end my remarks this morning by reiterating our commitment to work with this board, the Department of Higher Education, the Executive Office, and other state and local healthcare entities in the fight to combat the COVID virus and assist in our return to a state of normalcy.

Thank you.