



State Universities
of Massachusetts

CoP Remarks on Behalf of the State University System to the Board of Higher Education

March 28, 2023

Introduction:

Good Morning, Chairman Gabrieli, Commissioner Ortega, Assistant Secretary Bob LePage and members of the Board of Higher Education, and welcome Dr. Santos to a wonderful team. On behalf of the State Universities Council of Presidents, thank you for this opportunity to provide you with an update on the Massachusetts State University System.

This is the start of our final sprint to the end of the academic year. Our students have returned from spring break, some more rested than others. Some worked to help fund their education and some took advantage of the unique opportunities our campuses offer through alternative spring break programs.

At Salem State University, our Frederick E. Berry Institute of Politics was thrilled to host its first alternative spring break at the Massachusetts State House. There is probably a good punch line here, but I'll leave it alone. Fifteen students were selected through a competitive application process to participate in this three-day, overnight conference where they had the opportunity to engage with elected officials, policy makers, lobbyists and activists to better understand the Massachusetts legislative process and how the Commonwealth is tackling some of our most pressing social issues. Undergraduate and graduate students participated in immersive simulations, policy talks, networking events, museum visits, and more throughout the trip, much like the event Chairman Gabrieli talked about from last week.

These unique experiential learning opportunities allow students to see what they are learning in the classroom in practice. They also can spark a student's interest in a subject matter that is not central to their core academic pursuits. For example, while there were students studying political science participating in our alternative spring break trip, there also were several other departments represented including criminal justice, healthcare studies, history, psychology, sociology, and social work.

I should note that Salem State is not unique in offering these experiences for our its students. Our sister institutions offer similar opportunities during spring break, including Fitchburg State's Alternative Spring Break with Habitat for Humanity and MCLA's Spring Break Cultural and Service Trip to Belize.

These experiential learning opportunities are important for any college student, and our state university students should be no exception.

FY 2024 Budget:

Now some comments on the state budget. Chairman Gabrieli got it right. It is indeed a hallmark moment in the funding for public higher education.

Two weeks ago, President Mary Grant testified on behalf of the Council of Presidents at the Joint Ways and Means Committee hearing regarding the Healey-Driscoll Administration's state spending plan. President Grant expressed the CoP's gratitude for the proposed historic investments in our public higher education system that were included in House 1.

My colleagues and I are advocating for the legislature to embrace the funding levels included in the H.1. These recommendations recognize the needs of our students and campuses by:

- Significantly expanding the MassGrant Plus program to provide need-based financial assistance to our public higher ed students;
- Recapitalizing the State Universities Performance Based funding formula;
- Funding comprehensive student success supports; campus-based equity, diversity and inclusion initiatives and student behavioral and mental health programs, that we know are so needed even more so after the pandemic;
- Expanding early college and innovation pathways programs;
- Investing in capital construction and maintenance on our public higher education campuses; and,
- Funding to support our efforts to provide inclusive campus programming for students with severe intellectual disabilities.

We also greatly appreciate the fact that the Governor's budget prioritizes our public higher education system in the distribution of the billion dollars of Fair Share funding included for Fiscal Year 24. The State Universities have identified increasing affordability as our primary objective for the use of incremental Fair Share funding, along with some targeted investments in campus-level initiatives that align with our students' and the state's needs. The recommended investments from the Fair Share revenue included in House 1 for public higher ed begin to address affordability while ensuring that we are able to continue to offer high-quality and meaningful postsecondary degree pathways to our Massachusetts residents.

As you know, the Governor's spending plan also includes \$59 million in funding to stabilize the cost of attendance for our students through a so called "price lock" guarantee on tuition and fees. This plan would "lock" the cost of attendance for an incoming student so the price would remain the same for their four years at one of our nine state university institutions. This proposal will incentivize on-time degree completion and allow students and families to better plan for financing a postsecondary degree.

While we are committed to advocating with the legislature for sufficient funding to be included in the FY 24 budget which would allow our campuses to support a cost stability plan for our students, in order to be fair to ALL our students, we recommend supporting a tuition "price lock" guarantee not only for incoming students, but also a fee freeze for current students.

But as is the case with any new initiative, there are some issues that need to be ironed out in order for the first ever price lock guarantee for state university students to work. As I mentioned at the last BHE meeting, the capital construction policies put in place by the Baker Administration during a period of tighter finances are a problem for our campuses, especially with today's inflationary pressures increasing the costs of our projects.

Currently, four state university campuses have capital construction projects in the pipeline under the Baker Administration's funding policies. While we appreciate the projects were moved forward, the CoP maintains it is inconsistent with the DHE's Strategic Plan for Racial Equity for the Commonwealth to shift the financial burden of public higher ed construction projects onto our students. We're respectfully requesting the Commonwealth return to the practice of fully funding these important capital projects.

We are also actively advocating with the legislature for full funding of costs associated with our labor contracts, unfunded campus fringe benefit liabilities, and passage of H.1 funding levels for our state universities. We believe we can offer a “price lock guarantee” for our incoming students if these investments are made in our campuses and for our students.

In addition to the priorities included in House 1, the CoP will also be advocating for investments in the state universities internship incentive program, the public higher education endowment incentive program, and enhanced cybersecurity and information technology infrastructure funding.

If the legislature prioritizes public higher education as the Governor has in House 1, this will truly be a momentous budget for our students and our campuses, and we cannot thank the Board and the Department enough for your advocacy to date. We welcome the continued advocacy of this board throughout the budget process.

I would like to close my remarks with a reiteration of what the CoP shared at the recent Ways and Means hearing as it is worth repeating. My colleagues and I would like to recognize the incredible workforce across our state university system. My colleagues and I cannot thank our faculty and staff enough for their continued commitment to our students and our universities as we worked through some of the most challenging times of our careers.

It is regrettable that over the past several years public sector workforce wages have declined dramatically and annual cost of living increases have not kept pace with inflation. As a result, all our campuses are struggling to recruit and retain the high quality and diverse workforce that our students deserve.

At the end of this month, the state universities will begin negotiations with our three labor unions for a successor agreement to our 2020-2023 collective bargaining agreements. We encourage the state to recognize the value of our workforce by issuing financial parameters that invest in our employees and provide a COLA that reflects the inflationary factors impacting our workforce.

As you know, past administrations instituted a “state supported share” methodology for funding labor contracts that covers only a portion of the salary and benefits included in the collective bargaining agreement. Because of this methodology, the largest cost-drivers for our institutions are underfunded collective bargaining agreements for our employees. Since the remainder of the salary increases and the employee fringe benefit costs for underfunded salary increases must be covered by the institutions, and in essence, our students, we continue to urge our state leaders to ensure that contractual increases are actually fully funded, just as the state does for all other state employees.

Fringe benefits are now running past 40 percent. This is not sustainable. Bridgewater State, for example, will spend \$12 million on fringe benefits alone next year.

Conclusion:

This is historic, high-water mark moment of investment in public higher education. I thank the Board again for your support and advocacy and look forward to working with you as the budget process plays out.

I'd be happy to answer any questions you have. Thank you.