



Massachusetts Board of Higher Education Community College President's Report

Delivered by David Podell, President, MassBay Community College
Chair, Community College Council of Presidents

December 13, 2022

Good morning Chair Gabrieli, Secretary Peyser, Commissioner Ortega, and members of the Board.

Commissioner, we'd like to once again welcome you to Massachusetts and offer you a warm welcome on the occasion of your first full Board meeting.

Before I begin my remarks, I'd like to offer thanks to Secretary Peyser for his years as Secretary of Education. The Commonwealth has been well-served with Secretary Peyser at the helm, and he will be missed by the community college presidents. We offer our thanks as well to Governor Baker and Lieutenant Governor Polito who, with Secretary Peyser, have introduced initiatives that have strengthened the community college segment.

Strategic Finance Framework

As most of you know, I provided remarks at the November FAAP Advisory Council meeting with respect to the Strategic Finance recommendations. The community college presidents have been grateful for the opportunities to discuss the recommendations that followed the E.Y. Parthenon report and we are appreciative that our concerns been considered. Thank you to Chair Conforme, Co-Chair LaRock, and to the full FAAP Council. I would also thank you, Mr. Chairman, for making yourself available to us as we worked to understand each other's point of view. Finally, we have appreciated the thoughtful work by E.Y. Parthenon, and we look forward to today's discussion.

I am pleased to say that the community college presidents support the motion in front of you today with the understanding that there is much work yet to be done on the specifics. To that end, the community college presidents respectfully request seats at the table over the coming months as specific action items are developed for legislative consideration.

I would like to offer some thoughts on the topics that have been discussed in the last month. First, at least doubling need-based financial aid would dramatically improve access to community colleges for countless students in need. As you know, community college students are more likely to be students of color and more likely to be lower-income students when compared to students at four-year institutions. We are very pleased that the Governor-Elect has recognized the important role community colleges

play when it comes to educating adults without a college degree, and we are excited by the proposed MassReconnect program in which Massachusetts residents age 25 and older without a degree could enroll at a community college for free.

Second, major new investments into annual state appropriations is welcome and long overdue. Our institutions have struggled to keep student costs low in the face of appropriations that have simply not kept pace with rising operational costs. Historically, whenever there has been an economic downturn, appropriations from public higher education were cut in order to balance the budget. Unfortunately, during good times, such cuts were not consistently restored, resulting in an increasingly large gap between operating costs and state appropriations. It is time to recognize the value public higher education provides to the Commonwealth and its citizens and to fund it appropriately. In future discussions, we will advocate, as we have in the past, for a methodology that recognizes headcount in the computation of enrollment to account for the large number of students whose financial and life situations require them to enroll part-time. An instructive example can be found in the CARES Act in which Congress, in the first round of CARES Act support, used an FTE-based formula for enrollment in determining the funding of individual colleges; however, by the second round, Congress recognized that many private institutions were receiving far more money than community colleges of the same size and incorporated headcount into the enrollment formula. We hope that, in the months ahead, Massachusetts does not make the same mistake and thereby shortchange community college students.

Third, shifting long-standing cost drivers off the backs of students and instead onto the Commonwealth where they belong is wise. The collective bargaining increases and lack of fringe support has driven down the ability of the community colleges to keep full-time faculty lines in place, instead forcing us to rely more heavily – too heavily – on adjuncts. And, although we have many wonderful adjunct faculty, they are not paid to be present full-time and provide students with advisement, guidance, and support. You may not be aware that the first step for a full-time community college assistant professor with a master's degree, under our current contract, is a mere \$48,811. Nearly all K-12 school districts in the state pay their teachers with master's degrees more than this. And our full-time faculty teach a course load of *five* courses per semester, which in academia is considered an extremely heavy load; it is the largest I have encountered having worked in three colleges prior to my coming to Massachusetts. In addition to ensuring that fringe for all employees, as well as the annual increases in collective bargaining, are fully covered by the state, we must also take a hard look at what we are actually paying the people who actually educate our students. I also note that, until just this last year, raises for non-unionized professionals have solely been paid for by the students.

Fourth, the community colleges strongly support an enhanced and better-funded version of the Higher Education Incentive Fund. At the time of its original inception, there was substantial investment in this work that allowed for colleges to be innovative in their approach. Seeing this pot of funding receive a large new investment would be welcome as we work collaboratively with the Department to further student success.

Finally, the community colleges agree that transparency and predictability in student charges are priorities, as is the colleges' ability to retain all student charges collected. We recognize the awkwardness of the current tuition versus fees equation. We are further frustrated that, unlike UMass., community college students' tuition goes directly into the general fund of the Commonwealth, no different than sales tax or income tax. That may have made sense when the Commonwealth was funding 85 to 90 percent of the cost of attendance, but those days are long-gone, and our community college students are, peculiarly and unfairly, still subjected to what is, in effect, a tax.

We also believe in accountability regarding the cost of college. This accountability rests with our local boards of trustees, gubernatorially-appointed governing boards with a fiduciary duty under the oath of

office they take to the Commonwealth and its taxpayers for important reasons. Those boards know our local needs best, and help insulate colleges from the often shifting priorities of state-level boards and policy-makers.

Over the past eight years, we have developed a strong working relationship with the current administration, with this Board and Board Chair, and with this Secretary of Education, and the result has been considerable trust built among us, and some important accomplishments. But our own experience over many years has demonstrated that, even when trust and highly effective working relationships like this are built and result in important agreements, those relationships and those agreements are not binding on future leaders and policymakers, or when the state experiences its next recession and need for financial reductions, which it inevitably will.

As the E.Y Parthenon report clearly illustrates, state investment has not kept up with the needs of higher education over the decades, leading in the past to increased costs for students, significant growth in deferred maintenance needs on our campuses, and other shortcomings. We are concerned that, if we were relinquish the authority for setting most of our costs to anyone other than our local, gubernatorial-appointed boards of trustees, our students may seriously suffer the consequences in the future.

Our boards have demonstrated admirable responsibility and substantial restraint in setting student fees, despite appropriations not having kept up with costs. Indeed, community colleges in the Commonwealth are significantly more affordable than the other options students have, and our student charges are consistent with those in states that share the same level of state support. We are very proud of the diligence each board has shown in holding student costs to the lowest level possible. Given this record of success, the community colleges' local boards should continue to have responsibility for determining student costs, as they have done so responsibly and effectively for over three decades. The community colleges support making tuition the more substantial of the two charges, provided that the establishment of all student charges is left to local boards.

Having noted the beliefs of the community college presidents, I return to the motion at hand. We support it and we hope that, in the process to follow, the more specific recommendations that go forward reflect the positions for which we advocate.

Thank you for the work you have done to elevate this conversation and allow us to highlight the challenges our students, faculty, and staff face every day as they work to better the Commonwealth through higher education.