

MA Board of Higher Education Performance Review

Commissioner Noe Ortega

April, 2024

To: Commissioner Ortega

From: BHE Chair Chris Gabrieli

On behalf of the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education (BHE), I offer the following review of your initial performance over the time period from your official start date at November 1, 2022 through the end of calendar 2023. We have relied on your self-evaluation submitted in early April, 2024 as our starting point.

Before launching into specifics, allow me to highlight two key points. First, as a new Commissioner and reflecting our collective desire to modernize and evolve all of our processes and functions, this review is meant to shift our approach to reviewing your position as Commissioner. We want to be able to frame your review in the context of clear longer-term overarching and shorter-term deliverable goals for the BHE/DHE. And we want to center your review on your personal work to accomplish those goals and strengthen the capacity and position of the DHE. Our ongoing work on strategic planning should allow the former to be fully realized by the end of this calendar year and we appreciate and support your shift of the self-review focusing on your personal accomplishments for the year in your role as Commissioner versus the Department's overall progress. While as our CEO you are responsible for the DHE's work and progress, we agree that your direct review should focus primarily on what you personally have done to advance that.

Second, I want to state very clearly – we are very pleased and encouraged by your initial performance. We are learning together what this role can and should be in your hands and on our watch over the years to come and we expect greater clarity from here but it is clearly the sentiment of the BHE as a whole that you have been a welcome success as an energetic, engaged, results-oriented, savvy and values-driven leader for our combined efforts. We especially appreciate how quickly you came up to speed on the unique opportunity in financial aid and how openly and proactively you have engaged with us and with so many stakeholders.

Looking Back

We appreciate your self-review naming four initial goals. While these probably represent some degree of retroactive goal setting, they allow us to all focus on a helpful and sensible framework for considering what you have been primarily focused upon. We know that the work

of the Commissioner and Department extend to many important, ongoing functions and special case challenges and opportunities but we also believe it is important to have clarity on priorities.

Following your lead, this section of your review will match up to your four named initial goals.

1. Stakeholder Engagement and Culture of Systemness

We cannot agree more that engagement with the many internal and external stakeholders of the BHE and DHE is job one for the Commissioner. As the clear leader and focal point of our collective effort, you must be known to and trusted by the many different stakeholders ranging from presidents and Board members of our many public and private institutions; to other governmental leaders such as the Secretary of Education, other Commissioners, and all BHE members; to our faculty and staff representatives and union leaders; our legislative partners in the Massachusetts House and Senate; and to the many colleagues and stakeholders in our civil society including think tanks, foundations, businesses, associations, community organizations and civil rights groups, to name only some.

This demands a tremendous amount of time and energy from you, as well as a prioritization of messaging. We agree that focusing on “systemness” and how a vigorous and proactive BHE/DHE can be a key partner and ecosystem enabler for our campuses to thrive is a great starting point. After a pandemic and a long-ish transition out period from former Commissioner Santiago, the vigor and sincerity of your outreach has been noted and appreciated.

2. Department Capacity and Team Building

We agree that building the team and capacity of the DHE was and remains a critical top priority for you in order to accomplish all of what we are obliged to do and all of what we aspire to do. We acknowledge that a number of key positions were vacant on your arrival, largely intended to give you the freedom to build the team yourself. We wish this somehow could have moved faster though as a new Commissioner getting to know the team and the Commonwealth and as part of a new Administration and in the context of state governmental processes, it was and is time consuming to do. We are excited about the new members of the team and also about the constructive mix of experienced folks and their institutional memory with new teammates and their fresh perspectives, including drawing on experiences in other states. We thank you for the diligent work to recruit the new members, to set new structures internally and to fill vacant positions needed so we can move forward full steam ahead.

3. Improve Efficiencies and Output

We appreciate your candid description of the challenges that the DHE has been facing to meet the expectations and needs of stakeholders for speed and quality of our processes. Many of us have been at least somewhat aware of this and we agree that the DHE cannot hope to help transform higher education at the pace needed to meet the current challenges and opportunities

without ensuring that we are an effective, reliable, and transparent entity. For the BHE, the specifics of that, even the metrics by which to judge that, are pretty opaque. While we are all excited about the strategic initiatives and priorities we have been discussing, we recognize that the DHE also has production duties and we agree that as Commissioner you are responsible for earning and maintaining everyone's trust in the DHE's reliable and timely performance. We look forward to learning more about how to objectively assess that, as well as what you can do with the team to meet this goal.

4. Department Focus and Priorities

Your self-review comments here focus on the very important work successfully undertaken over the past 18 months to advance the state's financial aid offerings. For the BHE and DHE, this has meant working with many other stakeholders to advance the Strategic Higher Education Finance (SHEF) framework approved by the BHE in December, 2022 after more than a year of highly transparent and collaborative work.

We agree that you did the right thing throwing yourself right into that work, accepting both the framework developed largely before your arrival and also the deluge of activity and discussion necessary to advance it. This truly is a unique "window of opportunity" afforded by the voters' approval of the Fair Share Act, including an explicit commitment to investing a share of the proceeds into public higher education.

While all of us know that there is much of the SHEF framework to continue to advance to meet our ideals, the progress and success has been very notable. And your contribution through your tireless work, your recognized high expertise on college financial aid and financing, your commitment to the key values, your willingness to listen and adapt as needed and your resilience have all played a significant part in the collective victory for students, colleges, communities and our Commonwealth.

Looking Ahead

We appreciate your naming some specific goals by which we can measure your contributions in the remainder of this calendar year. Much of this will likely roll into 2025 and beyond. Again, following your framework:

1. Establishing our top priorities and action agendas

The BHE has a high appetite to get this done well and as soon as possible. We feel that the BHE and DHE have long lacked a clarity of top priorities, as well as an accountability of the near-term (12-18 month) actions that will build towards progress on those priorities. Your framing of potential directions at the January, 2024 retreat was a welcome start. I, as Chair, have

acknowledged to the Board members that I am also responsible for some of the slower completion of this work than desired because of the need to fully engage on the SHEF priority and special window of opportunity, as well as the need to build capacity. But this is a crucial goal to accomplish in calendar 2024. We need the outcome to be crisp and disciplined and to be sufficiently well-framed and specified. And we need the process to be highly engaged with BHE members and key stakeholders including, of course, our campuses, our governmental partners and as many of the key external colleagues and stakeholders as possible. Success here would be a clear prioritized set of top goals, a clear set of accountable next steps and a sense of consensus or at least common understanding across our field.

2. *Engagement with the Board and Structures and Processes of the Board*

We appreciate your highlighting this internal goal. While we acknowledge the complexity of working with a fairly large group of diverse members who bring quite different career experiences and personal perspectives to the table, we believe that public leadership demands that we do our job by working well with you and the executive leadership team at the Department.

BHE members appreciate that there was significant discussion of this at the January retreat and hope to see that you and I (and here too, the accountability flows to me as well) complete a process that allows all BHE members to feel heard and engaged and for the Board functioning to efficiently support BHE member participation in developing policy on the most strategic matters.

3. *Improving Department Productivity*

This is the most operational and internally facing of your proposed priorities. Given you named it as an issue that needs to be addressed both to do the right thing and to earn greater trust from the field, we concur. What is difficult for us to know is how to assess this. Can you please think through and propose how we can have some transparency/insight into this? Perhaps measuring campus opinion would be one valuable way.

4. *Increase the Visibility and Engagement of the BHE/DHE*

We agree that for too long the BHE and DHE have been pretty quietly/anonymously working on important issues facing higher education without building valuable bridges to the many key external stakeholders who care or should care about the work we do and the health of higher education. The result is that some of our work falls prey to the “tree that falls in the forest that no one hears” challenge. Without becoming self-aggrandizing and while remaining as objective, systemic, and transparent an entity as possible, there is much we could and should do to both share our goals, actions and progress and the status, accomplishments and importance of the work of our campuses and system. Here too it might be important to ask – how would we know?

Summary

We thank you and congratulate you for an outstanding first 18 months of service. You have brought admirable skill, energy, style, and values to the work at hand. Your willingness and ability to immediately engage on our top priority and opportunity - a once in a generation shot at major new investments to support students and schools - has yielded important results. Your self-review reminds us of the path here and the accomplishments to date and sets out a clear set of goals for your work in 2024 and beyond. With such strong initial results and your feet now set firmly on the ground here, come high expectations for even more momentum and results in 2024 along the four dimensions you name in your self-review. Onward!