



State Universities
of Massachusetts

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

June 20, 2023

Introduction

Good Morning, Chairman Gabrieli, Secretary Tutwiler, Commissioner Ortega, and members of the Board of Higher Education. I too want to reflect on the passing of David Bartley. Of course, I am all for state representatives becoming college presidents. He served as the youngest House speaker since Civil War and was the author of Chapter 766, which ensures free and appropriate education for disabled children from age 3 to 22. This is a remarkable law that we may take for granted today. On behalf of the State Universities Council of Presidents, thank you for the opportunity to provide you with an update on the Massachusetts State University System. It's hard to believe we've wrapped up another academic year.

I would like to welcome James Vander Hooven, President of Mount Wachusett Community College, as the new Chair of the Community College Council of Presidents. President Vander Hooven, since I am serving as Chair of the State Universities Council of Presidents for another year, I look forward to working with you as we continue strengthening the partnerships between the state universities and community colleges. I also would like to thank my friend and colleague, David Podell. Thank you, President Podell, for working to align our two systems and collaborating with me and my state university colleagues throughout this year – especially on the issue of fully funding capital projects.

2023 Commencements

I would like to begin my remarks by congratulating the Class of 2023 and recognizing the accomplishments of all our public higher education graduates. Collectively, our state universities celebrated nearly 10,000 graduates this year. For several of our campuses, these commencement celebrations mark the first time we have filled our arenas to capacity since the onset of the pandemic.

Proud does not begin to describe the feeling of standing on stage and looking out on a sea of smiling, diverse, accomplished faces – even more so now as we anticipate the Supreme Court ruling on affirmative action. Our graduates successfully navigated the challenges of earning an academic degree, while also having to pivot several times throughout the pandemic; many starting their college experiences with minimal in-person contact as campuses worked to keep our communities safe through changing public health guidelines. Our graduates excelled in their studies, at their internships, and as campus leaders. They are prepared and eager to take on whatever the future holds, with the majority likely remaining in the Commonwealth to strengthen our economy and our communities.

As with our celebrations in the past, our commencement ceremonies also acknowledge the contributions of leaders who have made, and continue to make, a difference in the lives of Massachusetts residents and the world; many of whom are alumni. Fitchburg State welcomed award-winning media technology pioneer and alumnus John Honeycutt, and Westfield State welcomed award-winning actor and alumnus James Jackson, Jr. as their distinguished keynote speakers. Worcester State honored renowned behavioral scientist, researcher, author, and alumna Dr. Kristen Lee, Maritime and Mass. Maritime honored, Kenneth Turner, President and CEO of the Massachusetts Life Sciences Center and Marty Walsh, the new Executive Director of the National Hockey League Players' Association. At Salem State, we honored the first state university alum to serve in the Commonwealth's corner office, Lieutenant Governor Kim Driscoll with a Doctor of Humane Letters.

Orientation and Enrollment

While we wish our graduates well as they enter the workforce or continue their postsecondary journeys by seeking an advanced degree, summers remain a busy time at a state university campus. Summer classes are already in session, and we are also welcoming our newly admitted students in orientation programs throughout the summer. I've attended seven orientations on our campus just in the past two weeks. It is a thrill to meet our first-year students and their families as they begin their higher education journeys. I'd also note a significant uptick in out-of-state families specifically mentioning being attracted to Massachusetts because of our inclusive and welcoming environment. Excited, eager and a little nervous, our incoming students ground us in the work ahead.

Across the state university system, enrollments are stabilizing, and several of our campuses have seen an increase in enrollments from the decreases we experienced due to the pandemic. Transfers still seem to be lagging, but I am encouraged by what we are hearing from our community college partners. Our admissions teams continue the hard work attracting new students to our campuses and making our educational opportunities accessible to the students in our region, and retention remains a top priority for every employee on our campuses.

End of Year Retreat

As we do every academic year, the Council of State University presidents gathered once again at Massachusetts Maritime Academy for our end of the year retreat; what a spectacular setting. The CoP and I would like to thank Secretary Tutwiler and Commissioner Ortega for joining us this year. All in attendance, including the presidents, provosts, student affairs vice presidents, and enrollment managers, appreciate the generosity of your time and your sharing of the Administration's top priorities and goals. We also thank you for the opportunity to have an open discussion about areas of interest to our students and campuses, including MassGrant Plus eligibility criteria; student mental health and safety; capital construction projects; cybersecurity; and the funding of collective bargaining agreements.

We look forward to continuing to delve into "systemness," and how the state universities can continue to collaborate and communicate with the Executive Office of Education and Department of Higher Education, as well as our colleagues at the community colleges and UMass system. An example of this system-wide collaboration is the commitment of all 29 Massachusetts public campuses to ensure the Commonwealth remains open, welcoming, and inclusive to students of color and the typically underrepresented students in higher education.

Indeed as we await the likely adverse Supreme Court decision, I stand firmly with my state university colleagues, specifically, to declare that the state universities will continue to ensure that students of color, first-generation college students, LGBTQIA+ students, and other historically underrepresented students in higher education are able to access the high-quality, post-secondary educational opportunities we offer and they deserve. This is our wheelhouse. It is who we are and what we do.

Our state colleges and universities are the backbone of our economy as our graduates remain here – to live, work and raise their families. There is much work ahead to provide all students in the Commonwealth access to higher education. Due to changing regional demographics, we must respond to the educational needs of these new community members.

At Salem State, we are working hard to make this pathway accessible and to prepare for the students of our future. In the next couple of years Salem State will proudly become Massachusetts' first four-year public institution with a Hispanic-Serving/Minority-Serving designation, with more than 25 percent of our student population identifying as Hispanic. Serving 11 of the 26 Gateway Communities in the Commonwealth, and with our top feeder communities being Lynn, Peabody and Salem, we know the opportunities higher education brings to increased social mobility, civic life, culture and the economy. This is just one example of how open and adaptable our state university campuses can be. The Council of Presidents is committed to being an active partner in forming a united front with the Administration and our public and private higher education partners to ensure that all students continue to see themselves as valued members of our campus communities.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, I would like to end my remarks by thanking the Board of Higher Education, Chair Gabrielli, Secretary Tutwiler, and Commissioner Ortega for the support given to our State Universities throughout this academic year. While we await the final details of the state budget, we know the outcome will be a truly historic investment in public higher education as a result of the Fair Share funds, and your zealous advocacy. The state, our campuses, and most importantly, our students will benefit greatly from this enhanced funding. The presidents and I would also like to extend our sincere appreciation to the dedicated and responsive staff of the Department of Higher Education and Executive Office who continue to work closely with our campuses to support the students we serve.

I wish you all a wonderful summer and look forward to seeing you all again at the first meeting this fall. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.