

## **State Universities BHE Segmental Report – June 21, 2021**

Good Morning, 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 this opportunity to provide you with an update on the Massachusetts State University System.

I understand that this Board has a full agenda and I intend to be brief. I would like to share with you our plans for the fall and some encouraging information about our efforts to lead the way in vaccinating our communities.

### **Return to Campus for Fall 2021**

Like all our colleagues at Massachusetts higher education institutions, we are striving to return to pre-pandemic life on our campuses for the fall. Keeping the health and safety of our students and campus communities at the forefront of our planning, we will continue to monitor the spread of the COVID virus and incorporate health measures into our Safe Return to Campus plans for the fall. Our universities will offer a traditional schedule of in-person classes in addition to online and hybrid options for both residential and commuter student populations.

We all intend to repopulate our campus housing to levels that balance the demand for housing with the health of our campus populations. Although the Governor has lifted the State of Emergency and rescinded the higher ed control plan, we will continue to ensure that your state universities lead in the effort to curb the COVID virus.

We will also continue to ensure that critical supports remain in place as we navigate out of this pandemic and make sure that we are serving our most vulnerable students. This means continuing to provide technological assistance, critical mental health resources, and make sure that our most financially needy students benefit from funds available from the American Rescue Plan.

As you can imagine, our universities are facing budget challenges directly related to the impact of COVID, but also from the changing demographics in the Northeast and declining student enrollment across the system. Our campuses are reporting varied enrollment declines resulting in budget deficits.

However, much of those deficits can be mitigated, in the near-term, by the use of Federal COVID relief funds, state funding of our funding formula account, one-time debt restructuring initiatives, hiring freezes, use of campus reserves, and other actions to balance campus operating budgets. All-in-all, we are in a much better place than what was forecasted just one year ago.

At your last meeting, I reported that the State Universities will require all students to be vaccinated against COVID-19 before they attend in-person classes next fall. My colleagues and I unanimously decided to require undergraduate and graduate students attending in-person classes, conducting research on campus, living in residence halls, or participating in campus life activities to become fully inoculated with an approved COVID-19 vaccine prior to the start of the 2021 academic year.

We also informed our workforce that there is an expectation that all employees will be fully vaccinated prior to the start of the fall semester. With only a few exceptions, our vaccination requirement has not only been embraced with strong support and compliance but applauded from all corners of our campus communities. With the cooperation of our students, staff and faculty, we are confident that our campus will exceed national and state vaccination rates. This confidence is supported by COVID Vaccination Surveys conducted on our campuses over the past few weeks. We are happy to report that the state universities fully expect our campus communities to have upwards of 90% or higher fully vaccinated population consistent with herd immunity guidance at the start of the semester in September.

**Bargaining Update and Financial Parameters:** I would also like to share an update with you on our contract negotiations with the four employee bargaining units. The state universities and the DHE have been meeting with union negotiators since March 30<sup>th</sup> on talks over successor agreements to the 2020-2021 CBA. The talks have been very cordial and productive, but we have a long way to go in order to reach agreement with our unit member's bargaining teams.

Our Council of Presidents has asked me to include in this report an update on bargaining to bring to your attention an issue about the financial parameters given to us by the Administration. We have been authorized to offer up to a three-year contract with salary increases of 1.5% as a "bonus" that does not go onto the employee's base salary for the first year, and a two percent salary increase for years two and three. I recognize that it is unusual for the State Universities Council of Presidents to discuss salary parameters with this Board but we want to go on record that we feel these parameters disadvantage our workforce and have been hesitant to make any financial proposal to date.

The reason we bring this issue to your attention is because we were in negotiations last year when the pandemic hit. In an effort to prioritize the mission of our universities and not allow prolonged and divisive contract negotiations to derail our work to educate our students, the unions agreed to a one-year contract with a zero-percent increase in their salary.

Let me underscore that, the unions agreed to a one-year contract with a zero-percent increase in their salary.

To my knowledge, the state university's workforce were the only public sector bargaining units to agree to such a deal. It is because of these agreements that our universities were able to fulfill our mission to offer high-quality educational pathways to our students throughout the pandemic. Other public sector units that did not reach agreement are now being offered a bonus for the current year and two subsequent years at 2%.

Despite having to pivot to remote teaching and work, despite having to learn how to use new technology, despite committing additional hours to learning how to use new equipment and software, despite adding lessons for their students on the new equipment and software, your faculty and staff succeeded at continuing to offer high quality learning for our students. All accomplished AFTER they agreed to a contract extension with no salary increase. And as I said earlier, to my knowledge, our unit colleagues were the only public sector bargaining units to agree to such a deal. And for this, the Administration has offered the same economic package as anyone else is being offered.

When I have spoken with my colleagues over the last 17 months of the pandemic, they have shared stories with me about siblings who died from COVID-19, parents who lived in retirement and care facilities whom they couldn't visit (some of whom died), about their children who weren't attending school and for whom there were limited caretakers, stories about their students who were struggling with a remote learning environment and the stress it created for them, and stories about declines in their own physical and mental health resulting from stress about the pandemic and the uncertainty of their job security (600,000 higher education layoffs). Despite all of these competing interests, our faculty and staff continued to carry out their responsibilities to make sure that our students received a high quality, public higher education.

As members of the Board of Higher Education you are our advocates with the Administration. I am asking you, I am imploring you to exercise your role as our advocates and to press the Administration to increase the economic parameters for our colleagues in the state universities.

Again, the state university's workforce were the only public sector bargaining units to agree to a one-year contract with a zero-percent increase in their salary. Now is the time to thank them for the cooperation they provided last year.

Now is the time to thank them for their extraordinary efforts during the last four academic terms. Now is the time when we can say to the faculty and staff of the State Universities we are grateful to you for centering our students in your lives in the midst of a global pandemic.

A 1.5% “bonus” that doesn’t even go into the employee’s base salary for the first year, and then a two percent salary increase for years two and three doesn’t reflect the sense of gratitude I feel for my colleagues’ work, nor should it for you.

Now is a rare opportunity for all of us to be on the same side of the table and to advocate for a reasonable, fair, and meaningful set of economic parameters indicative of our gratitude for our colleagues’ work. This is the moment for you, as members of the Board of Higher Education, to exercise your role as our advocates and to secure updated and much improved financial parameters that recognize the union’s willingness to set aside contentious contract bargaining last year and to make educating our students their priority.

I will close with this, thanks to the work of your Department of Higher Education, Secretary Peyser and Secretary of Health and Human Services MaryLou Sudders, 500 Massachusetts Maritime Cadets were able to fulfill their Sea Term requirement and are on track to graduate in June. Working with Secretaries Sudders and Peyser, MMA students were provided a COVID vaccine prior to “shipping-out” on their month-long semester aboard the Training Ship Kennedy. The cadets are scheduled to return to Buzzard’s Bay tomorrow morning having completed their mandatory graduation requirement for on-ship training. Without the intervention and assistance of Secretaries Peyser and Sudders, those cadets would not have been vaccinated, not able to complete their sea training, and not able to graduate this year. On behalf of Admiral McDonald, thank you for prioritizing Maritime cadets in the distribution of COVID vaccines earlier this spring.

Have a great summer and I look forward to your first fall meeting where we will share with you the success of our campus repopulation plans.