



Massachusetts Department of Higher Education

One Ashburton Place, Room 1401
Boston, MA 02108-1696

TEL (617) 994-6950
FAX (617) 727-0955
WEB www.mass.edu

Richard M. Freeland, *Commissioner*
Charles F. Desmond, *Chairman*
Massachusetts Board of Higher Education

MEMORANDUM

TO: Working Group on Student Learning Outcomes and Assessment

FROM: Richard M. Freeland, Commissioner

DATE: December 23, 2009

SUBJECT: Assessment Component of the Vision Project

On behalf of the Board and Department of Higher Education, thank you for your willingness to serve on the Working Group on Student Learning Outcomes and Assessment. As you will see from what follows, I am asking much from you—to become familiar with Massachusetts campus-based programs and practices and DHE initiatives; to examine information from a large body of research, literature, and best practice that relates to learning outcomes and assessment, and to provide commentary, analysis and recommendations. My overall concern is to look for ways to add strength and capacity to campus and system assessment efforts as one means of improving the quality of student learning in public colleges throughout the Commonwealth.

I am convinced that, by bringing together knowledgeable and experienced individuals from our campuses and asking them to work together in a deliberative process, we can build on existing strengths and chart the best course for the future. Working Group members will include college presidents, senior academic officers, faculty members, institutional research and assessment directors, students, a Board of Higher Education member and a member of the Department of Higher Education staff. (See Attachment 1 for list of members). I have asked Dr. Patricia Crosson, former Provost from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, former Trustee Chair of Greenfield Community College, and former President of the Community College Trustee Association, to chair the Working Group. In my conversations with her, Pat has been careful to point out that she is not a technical expert on assessment, but her strengths will allow for the collaborative process that I believe is so important to ultimate success.

The idea for a the Working Group on Student Learning Outcomes and Assessment grows out of the Vision Project that I have been discussing with Board of Higher Education members and college presidents. The Vision Project is intended to provide a means of focusing the work of the Department of Higher Education and unifying the work of public campuses around a set of educational outcomes chosen to support a bold vision: **“Massachusetts will produce the best-educated citizenry and workforce in the nation.”** When approved in final form by the Board, the Vision Project will set an important public agenda for higher education and represent a commitment by all of our

public campuses to producing nationally leading educational results at a time when the need for well-educated citizens and a well-prepared workforce is critical for the future of the Commonwealth. The Project will also signal a willingness to be transparent and accountable by establishing specific, measurable outcomes that allow us to compare our progress, at aggregate levels, with peer institutions and with other states and nations. (See Attachment 2 for PowerPoint presentation of current version of the Vision Project.)

Finding the most effective way to assess student learning outcomes and comparing our results on these measures with the achievements of students in other states are perhaps the most challenging components of the Vision Project. Your work on student learning outcomes and assessment will be extremely helpful in planning for implementation of the Vision Project.

The Working Group will meet monthly during spring and fall 2010. There are two distinct phases to the project, and I would like a report at the end of each phase. With apologies in advance for its length and detail, this memo spells out what I hope you will do and prepare in each phase of the project.

In Phase One (spring 2009) I would like the Working Group to:

- Review descriptions of campus-level programs for student learning outcomes and assessment. Through the presidents, I will ask campus chief academic officers to provide information on their programs to share with the Working Group. As you review the programs, please note that I am not asking for your judgments about specific programs but for you to consider the total mix of programs as a reflection of system strengths and weaknesses in the area of assessment of student learning. (See Attachment 3 for copy of letter to presidents and Attachment 4 for copy of survey instrument sent to chief academic officers.)
- Review studies, reports and recommendations by national and state higher education organizations that focus on student learning outcomes, campus-based assessment programs, nationally normed tests of student learning and other assessment measures. Pat Crosson has been engaged in this work for some months and will provide working group members with documents that will enlighten but not bury the group in homework.
- Consider the report of the Commissioner's Advisory Group on Undergraduate Education (CAGUE). Appointed by Board of Higher Education Chair Charles F. Desmond, CAGUE members included key state leaders in business, government, non-profit and community organizations and higher education. The CAGUE Report, received and approved by the Board of Higher Education at its December 2009 meeting, includes a set of proposed student learning outcomes and related recommendations that reflect employer, citizen, and legislative perspectives on the competencies needed by college graduates for career and citizenship demands. It also includes a set of recommendations for campus actions. College presidents have been asked to comment on the CAGUE Report, and recommendations and these comments should also be considered as part of your review. (See Attachment 5 for CAGUE Report.)

- Consider the Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) initiative sponsored by the American Association of Colleges & Universities (AAC&U). LEAP influenced many of the outcomes suggested in the CAGUE Report. It also provides an overarching yet adaptable framework for student learning outcomes and assessment that appears to fit the variety of institutions, programs, and students found in our system of public higher education.
- Weigh approaches to assessment that value our system of diverse institutions with diverse programs responsive to the learning aspirations and needs of diverse student bodies. As another of the important outcomes identified for the Vision Project is that Massachusetts will become a national leader in achieving comparable learning outcomes among different ethnic/racial, economic and gender groups; these approaches should inform strategies that contribute to reductions in performance gaps over time.

I would like a report at the end of Phase One that includes your analysis and commentary on the following:

- Overall strengths and weaknesses of campus learning outcomes and assessment programs.
- Approaches for building on our strengths even in an era of drastically constrained resources. Are there possibilities for collaborative activity and/or for highlighting model programs and best practices that would be helpful to campuses and could be promoted by DHE?
- Reactions to the student learning outcomes outlined in the CAGUE Report and your sense of the fit between these outcomes and those in use on the campuses.
- Reactions to the learning outcomes developed as part of the LEAP program and your sense of the fit between these outcomes and those in use on the campuses. The Association for American Colleges and Universities has encouraged Massachusetts to become a "LEAP state," which means promoting learning outcomes and rubrics developed by LEAP. States are welcome, even encouraged, to adapt LEAP as appropriate to local conditions. but LEAP states are expected to support an overall philosophy and framework. Should Massachusetts become a LEAP state?

In Phase 2 (fall 2010), I would like the Working Group to focus more directly at the state level and:

- Consider development of a set of student learning outcomes that reflect the common aspirations of our campuses and consider the advantages of having all public campuses use them. Campuses, of course, would continue to have additional learning outcomes based on their own unique missions, programs and student bodies.
- Review studies, reports and recommendations by national and state higher education organizations that focus on state-level, as opposed to institutional, policies and best practices for the assessment of college student learning, including materials

about state-mandated testing and state practices that link student learning assessment with statewide planning, performance measurement, public accountability, state ranking systems and international comparisons in higher education.

- Consistent with the outcome of the Board of Higher Education review of the Vision Project, consider the most effective way to implement the outcome that calls for Massachusetts to be a national leader in academic achievements of public college students on campus-level and national assessments of learning.
- Consider issues of accountability and transparency as they relate to student learning outcomes and assessment. Colleges, multi-campus systems and state boards vary in the content and amount of information from student learning assessment that is made public. What levels of accountability and transparency are appropriate for the Commonwealth?

At the end of Phase Two, I would like a report that:

- Provides an analysis of where Massachusetts stands in comparison to others in state efforts to support learning outcomes and assessment.
- Speaks to issues of state policy and practice, assessment tests, state rankings, accountability and transparency.
- Provides a plan for system-wide learning assessment based on a set of common learning outcomes and assessment measures that builds on and supports strong campus-based assessment programs.

I realize that I have asked much of you, but I know that each member of the Working Group already has extensive knowledge and experience to bring to group discussions. Your willingness to undertake this review and analysis will help DHE move forward with the Vision Project once its final form has been approved by the Board of Higher Education. Even more importantly, your recommendations will bring new strength, energy and quality to programs for student learning outcomes and assessment and ultimately result in improved student learning.

The first meeting will be held on **January 14 from 12-2 p.m.** at the DHE offices in Boston. I am looking forward to joining you at that meeting. Monthly meetings will be held thereafter, and Pat Crosson hopes to rotate them among campuses for the convenience of members. Thank you again for your willingness to be part of this Advisory Group.

Attachments:

1. Membership List, Working Group on Student Learning Outcomes and Assessment
2. Current PowerPoint description of Vision Project
3. Letter to College Presidents
4. Instrument for Survey on Student Learning Outcomes and Assessment Programs
5. Final Report from the Commissioners Advisory Group on Undergraduate Education