

Dear Massachusetts Higher Education Community:

I write today to you on behalf of the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education (BHE) about the important work we are doing to recruit the next Massachusetts Commissioner of Higher Education. We are grateful to Dr. Carlos Santiago for his leadership over the past seven years as Commissioner and all that he has done for the Commonwealth's students and colleges.

I don't believe I have to emphasize how important this moment is for higher education in America and here in Commonwealth. Never has the premium for higher skills and credentials been greater than today and nowhere is the economy and society more built on college-educated, high skills workers and leaders than here in Massachusetts. We lead the nation in the percentage of our working age adults who have a college degree and who have advanced degrees beyond that. And we live in a state that is literally world renowned as a bastion of excellence in higher education, public and private, and in education writ large.

That does not mean we lack challenges or can rest on laurels. Over the past few years, the BHE, on which I have the privilege of serving as Chair, has placed Equity as our top policy and performance priority for public higher education. Of course, we want to see overall attainment continue to grow and to seek excellence in all we do but we must face the fact that our higher education system outcomes remain disturbingly inequitable. As a matter of both our civic commitment to justice and fairness of opportunity and our economic self-interest, we must do better and accelerate change.

Nor does this all take place in a vacuum. The pandemic has made our task harder with worrisome falloffs in enrollment levels, especially in our community colleges, and clear signs that learning loss burdens have fallen most on those who were already at a disadvantage. Mental health and general wellbeing are clearly more important issues than ever. Further, frustration with the costs of higher education and the uneven outcomes is at a high and culture wars about campus speech and curricula, largely outside of Massachusetts so far, distract from the core work. Finally, where once the federal government appeared poised to take bold steps on college financing (e.g. "free college"), that seems to have largely faded back leaving us responsible to shape our own future.

The good news is that we have a lot to build on. Adding to the state's historically strong position in higher education overall, state government (thanks to the commitment of the Governor and the Legislature) has been investing impressively in Massachusetts public higher education. For example, we should all celebrate that this year's fiscal budget appears poised to eliminate all "unmet need" as defined federally and applied to tuition and fees for all students across all of our segments – UMass, state universities and community colleges. This accomplishment, called for by the BHE in its December, 2019 fiscal vision, marks an important step forward.

Further, the BHE, DHE and campuses along with many allies and supporters have been laying out the elements of a powerful [Equity Agenda](#) for years and in many cases making major progress towards them. For example, the state now sends vastly fewer students into the purgatory of "remediation" than we did a decade ago – through changes in state policy and

innovation on the ground at campuses, most students needing more academic support for gateway courses in math and English receive that in conjunction with their credit-bearing courses and are succeeding well. Similarly, over just five years, Massachusetts has built an Early College Initiative that now includes 39 sites across the state and will serve about 7,500 predominantly first generation, low-income and BIPOC students giving them a significant, well-supported opportunity to gain college traction and success well before they graduate high school.

The Department has undertaken a number of initiatives to further define the Equity Agenda ahead including reports, based on extensive and broad voice from stakeholders, on the New Undergraduate Experience and the Basic Needs of college students. The Board, working through our Finance and Administrative Policy Advisory Council and with the support of a leading outside consulting firm, is conducting a strategic review of how we finance public higher education in the state and the Department, also working with an outside consultant, is developing recommendations for a ten-year vision on how to achieve greater racial equity from our system.

The Commissioner Search Advisory Committee (CSAC) authorized by the BHE to identify and recommend to the BHE a slate of finalists for the BHE's consideration as the next Commissioner is just getting under way. We have retained a leading national search firm, [Academic Search](#), to help us conduct the search and we have convened a 23-member CSAC to help inform the plan and select the finalists. That CSAC involves a broad set of internal and external stakeholders with many forms of diversity to ensure we do our very best on this important work. By August of this year, we expect the BHE to convene, in public open meeting, and interview the recommended slate of finalists. This will culminate in a vote to select the next Commissioner, subject to statutorily required approval by the Secretary of Education.

We seek everyone's help along the way. We start with the belief that we have a lot of strategy in place and momentum on specific initiatives and want a leader capable of helping us build on that and accelerate our progress. Of course, any new leader will bring their own lived experience and perspectives as well, but the Board is aligned in our commitments and eager to move ahead boldly. We need a leader who can find what the Greeks called "the golden mean" in many dimensions – someone who can work closely in partnership with our campuses in our chosen system that provides considerable autonomy to each campus but at the same time be a leader who drives to new heights and ensures a system that is more than the sum of its parts. We want a leader who commands the respect of our field and can also bring the many outside stakeholders, such as community leaders and advocates, business and labor leaders and the K12 system, who need to be part of the future of higher education.

Most of all, we want a great human being who can inspire the Department, the campuses, the students and our Commonwealth to live up to our legacy and build upon it further. Massachusetts is a great place to live and work and a great place to advance higher education and to pioneer on equitability. We have a rich history, we have alignment across many critical stakeholders and decision makers including the executive and legislative branches, as well as the campuses and the Board, and we have the public and private resources to act on our beliefs.

Onward!

- Chris Gabrieli, Chair of Massachusetts Board of Higher Education and Chair of Commissioner Search Advisory Council