

**Massachusetts Board of Higher Education
EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE**

April 22, 2024
2:30 p.m.- 4:00 p.m.

The April 22, 2024, meeting of the Executive Committee of the Board of Higher Education (“BHE” or “the Board”) was held virtually on the web-conference platform Zoom.

Meeting Minutes

Committee Members Present: BHE Chair Chris Gabrieli; Alex Cortez; Bill Walczak; Veronica Conforme; and Commissioner Noe Ortega (non-voting, ex officio).

Others BHE Members Present: Secretary of EOE designee Robert Lepage; Cindy Mack (SAC Chair & BHE Student Member); and Andrew Whitcomb (non-voting UMass Student Segmental Advisor).

Department Staff Present: Constantia Papanikolaou; Elena Quiroz-Livanis; Cynthia Brown; and Richard Riccardi.

I. CALL TO ORDER

Board Chair Chris Gabrieli called the meeting to order at 2:37 p.m. Roll call attendance was taken (see above for attendance roster).

II. ACCEPTANCE OF MINUTES

Chair Gabrieli began the meeting by proposing a motion to approve minutes. Upon a motion duly made and seconded, the motion to approve the Executive Committee minutes for March 11, 2024, was approved unanimously by all members present, by roll call vote.

III. MOTIONS

List of Material's Used

BHE Motions 24-43 through 24-45

Chair Gabrieli noted that there were three (3) motions and one (1) item of discussion on the agenda.

Chair Gabrieli introduced *BHE 24-43 Approval of Letter of Intent of Bridgewater State University to Award the Bachelor of Arts in Individualized Studies and Authorization for Fast Track Review*. Chief of Staff Quiroz-Livanis introduced Bridgewater State University's (BSU) Provost Karim Ismaili and Dean of Continuing Students David Crane and noted that this is the Deputy Commissioner for Academic Affairs and Student Success Richard Riccardi's first Letter of Intent. Deputy Commissioner Riccardi stated that it is an honor to bring this Letter of Intent forward, as he was involved in Connecticut's Interdisciplinary Studies program. At this time, Assistant Secretary Robert LePage joined the meeting. Provost Ismaili provided background and context for the proposal and stated that BSU wants to advance this opportunity to students, which would allow them to return to the university to build a more customized Bachelor of Arts program. Dean Crane added that after reviewing the degree offerings at BSU, they decided to go with the nomenclature of individualized studies, as they want to provide students the opportunity to craft a degree that works for them. Dean Crane concluded his remarks by stating that BSU's goal is to provide a pathway to degree completion for post-traditional students. Provost Ismaili commented that this program would provide an incredible range of options for students.

Chair Gabrieli asked if BSU has determined how much of the program would be taken online versus on-campus. Dean Crane responded that the students have the discretion to choose online, on-campus, or both, as BSU offers hundreds of online options across all 30 majors, in addition to the online degree completion programs. Committee Member Walczak asked if BSU has received enough requests that indicate they will not have a problem obtaining the projected thirty-six (36) students to declare a major. Dean Crane replied that BSU has received a significant amount of interest from students, as students frequently inquire as to how BSU's current programs fit their existing credits. BSU continuously works with students to place them on the best academic and career pathway for themselves, but occasionally it is not an ideal fit. BSU is attempting to provide the option to match one area with another.

Committee Member Walczak questioned whether BSU has enough support for the students that choose this option to ensure that their academic credentials are

meaningful. Dean Crane responded that they believe they do, and BSU has a faculty board that will help govern the program, in addition to also having a dedicated coordinator and academic advisor who will assist students in making informed choices regarding their academic pathways. Committee Member Conforme noted that BSU listed other institutions that historically offered this program, and inquired what BSU has learned about the outcomes for those students once they acquired their degrees and entered the workforce. Provost Ismaili responded that BSU currently has a larger interdisciplinary studies initiative at the campus and they are finding that the flexibility with which an interdisciplinary option provides students is valuable but also accounts for workplace requirements in terms of skills, experience, and coursework.

Provost Ismaili further spoke about integrative learning and this program being in a similar category as their Childhood Studies program because it is their fastest growing program, demonstrating that employers are thinking about childhood differently as opposed to just teaching; he feels this is a similar program that connects different disciplines but is essentially self-directed by students and their interests. Dean Crane added that BSU knows that the economic impact outcome for students is an improvement in long-term economic standing. Dean Crane additionally spoke about the benefits of having interdisciplinary fields such as data analytics that provides students the opportunity to define their own pathway into a career, but also develop soft skills that employers are seeking like writing and analytical thinking. Provost Ismaili commented that individualized advising will be provided for the Individualized Studies program.

Committee Member Conforme asked if BSU will do anything specific to ensure that students are graduating with marketable skills. Dean Crane responded that BSU attempts to emphasize the skills in their curriculum and required logic writing course. Board Member Mack emphasized their pride in everything BSU has discussed and noted the importance of obtaining writing and communication skills. They asked when BSU plans to launch the program and if financial aid is incorporated in the cost. Provost Ismaili replied that this will be a financial aid eligible program, and timing on the launching of the program is based on the approval of the motion, but ideally by Fall 2024.

Chair Gabrieli noted that BSU could possibly be asked about the program's eventual outcomes. Chair Gabrieli spoke briefly about the Board's concerns about the long-term outcomes and socioeconomic mobility impacts, as a recent student highlighted that fifty-two (52) percent of college graduates are under-employed in areas that do not require a college degree. He also expressed his enthusiasm about the program when

considering the number of Massachusetts students who have college credits but no degree and welcomes it as a strategy or workforce and equity goals for the state.

Hearing no further discussion, Chair Gabrieli called for a motion to approve BHE 24-43. Upon a motion duly made and seconded, the BHE Motion 24-43 was approved unanimously by all members present, by roll call vote.

Next, Chair Gabrieli introduced *BHE 24-44 Application of the American University of Greece to Award the Master of Arts in Learning Design and Technology*. Chair Gabrieli provided a brief summary of the clarification strategy for the American University of Greece (AUG) motion, as the institution applied for degree granting authority on the basis of good faith believing that this degree program was included as part of a prior conferral of degree-granting authority. The Department's Associate Commissioner for Regulatory and Veteran Affairs Cynthia Brown added that the Board approved AUG's application in October 2022. In that October 2022, AUG received initial authorization from the Board to operate as a post-secondary institution and offer 30 undergraduate and 22 graduate degrees in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. AUG has been operating under the mistaken assumption that the authorization granted to the University by the Board in 2022 also included the authority to offer the MALDT. (See BHE Motion 23-14).

As a result of the misunderstanding, AUG is now granting the MALDT degrees through the American College of Greece, which is physically located in the country of Greece. Associate Commissioner Brown added that this program was under design when they were completing the work for AUG's application and reiterated there was a misunderstanding about whether the application process would include new degrees (e.g., the MALDT), and what the extent of the degree granting authority would be at the outset of this new approval. Associate Commissioner Brown then confirmed that AUG now understands new degree programs must come to the Board for degree-granting authority.

Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou advised the Committee members that it is not unusual for institutions to request the Board to retroactively approve degree-granting authority. She noted that it is not uncommon for private higher education institutions physically located and operating in Massachusetts to be offering a degree under the mistaken assumption that they had broader degree granting authority than what was originally granted by the BHE. The frequency of such occurrences ultimately resulted in the need for the BHE to promulgate a specific regulation to allow the BHE to retroactively approve degrees awarded to students,, provided that the degree program(s) in issue go through the standard staff review process to assess whether the degree programs for which retroactive approval is being sought meet minimum regulatory criteria.. She added that the reason the BHE has not seen many of these

retroactive degree- approval requests is that they have typically been handled in the summer, through the Commissioners summer delegated authority for administrative efficiency.

Hearing no further discussion, Chair Gabrieli called for a motion to approve BHE 24-44. Upon a motion duly made and seconded, BHE Motion 24-44 was approved unanimously by all members present, by roll call vote.

Chair Gabrieli introduced the final motion *BHE 24-45 Board of Higher Education fiscal Year 2025 and Fiscal Year 2026 Meeting Schedule*. Chair Gabrieli briefly discussed the Board's meeting schedule for the upcoming two (2) Fiscal Years. Committee Member Walczak asked if anything changed on the schedule. Chief of Staff Quiroz-Livanis replied that a small technical amendment is required for the September 2025 date to ensure the Board Meeting falls on a Tuesday- September 9th. Hearing no further discussion, Chair Gabrieli called for a motion to approve BHE 24-45. Upon a motion duly made and seconded, BHE Motion 24-45 was approved unanimously by all members present, by roll call vote.

III. DISCUSSION

- **Commissioner's Evaluation**

List of Material's Used: *Commissioner's F2023 Self Evaluation*

Chair Gabrieli provided a brief update on the Commissioner's Evaluation, noting that Board members have received Commissioner Ortega's self-evaluation, and he will be developing an initial draft evaluation for full board approval next week.

Chair Gabrieli also referenced the Board Retreat scheduled for September and mentioned that two "policy fellows" would be joining the Department for six (6) months to provide additional support to the Department in furtherance of the Board work in setting strategic priorities.

IV. OTHER BUSINESS

Committee Member Cortez commented on the *Boston Globe's* recent editorial regarding college closures in Massachusetts and acknowledged Chair Gabrieli and the Department staff for their work in this area. Commissioner Ortega thanked Committee Member Cortez for elevating the matter and noted that there were several articles addressing this

topic. Commissioner Ortega stated that he was very pleased by how much of a head start Massachusetts had relative to other states. Commissioner Ortega briefly spoke about the Department's Financial Assessment and Risk Monitoring (FARM) Process for the Commonwealths' private, independent colleges, and thanked Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou, along with Deputy Commissioner Matt Cole, Associate Commissioner Brown, and several other Department staff members, for their work in implementing the regulatory framework. He said the Department is in a great place to be more proactive as opposed to reactive.

V. ADJOURNMENT:

On a motion duly made and seconded, the meeting adjourned at 3:23 p.m.