

MASSACHUSETTS BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

February 25, 2025

10:00 a.m.

Via Zoom

Meeting Minutes

A meeting of the Board of Higher Education (BHE or Board) was held on Tuesday, February 25, 2025, remotely via teleconference (Zoom).

The following Board Members were present:

Chris Gabrieli, Chair

Danielle Allen

Mary Burns

Harneen Chernow

Ann Christensen¹

Veronica Conforme

Alex Cortez

Paul Mattera

Niki Nguyen, Voting Student Member, State University Segment

Christina Royal

Robert LePage, Assistant Secretary of Education

Bill Walczak

Judy Pagliuca

Noe Ortega, Commissioner and Secretary to the Board

Thalles De Souza, non-voting Student Advisor, UMass segment

The following Board Members or Advisors were absent:

Patrick Tutwiler, Secretary of Education

Imani-Barbour, non-voting Student Advisor, State University segment

I. CALL TO ORDER

¹ Arrived at 10:16 am, after roll call attendance was taken.

Board Chair Chris Gabrieli called the meeting to order at 10:02 a.m. Roll call attendance was taken. Chair Gabrieli reviewed the meeting's agenda, which featured a panel discussion of sub-120 credit baccalaureate degree programs and a presentation from the Executive Office of Administration and Finance (ANF) on the Governor's proposed allocation of Fair Share Amendment funding.

II. COMMISSIONER'S SPOTLIGHT

List of Documents Used

[Commissioner's Spotlight](#)

Commissioner Ortega welcomed everyone and confirmed that the meeting would broaden its focus to include collaborative efforts with the Office of Administration and Finance (ANF). Commissioner Ortega introduced ANF Secretary Matthew Gorzkowicz, who proceeded to discuss the BRIGHT Act, which aims to enhance post-secondary opportunities by modernizing infrastructure in public institutions.

Secretary Gorzkowicz stated that the BRIGHT Act seeks to address issues of deferred maintenance, decarbonization, and modernization of public higher education facilities. He noted that many public higher education facilities in Massachusetts, many of which were constructed during the 1970s, are aging and require urgent attention, as higher education accounts for nearly half of the state's managed building portfolio.

Secretary Gorzkowicz emphasized the necessity of decarbonizing campuses to meet state climate goals, highlighting that two-thirds of carbon emissions from state buildings come from higher education campuses. He stated that traditional funding sources, such as the capital investment plan, have not kept pace with the growing needs for maintenance and modernization, leading to an increasing backlog. The BRIGHT Act proposes leveraging \$125 million from the voter-approved Fair Share surtax to unlock \$1.2 billion in special obligation bonds, which will fund various infrastructure projects over the next decade. These proposed projects include the construction of new laboratories, upgrades to facilities, and replacement of outdated HVAC systems, all of which are aimed at enhancing energy efficiency and modernizing campus environments.

Secretary Gorzkowicz pointed out that there are two critical bills progressing through the legislature: the House 1 proposal and the BRIGHT Act. He indicated that both are essential for funding higher education initiatives. House 1 represents the Governor's FY '26 budget and includes an appropriation of \$125 million from the Fair Share Amendment surtax to cover debt

service for special obligation bonds issued over the next decade. The BRIGHT Act provides necessary authorizations for the Commonwealth to issue approximately \$2.5 billion in debt aimed at addressing deferred maintenance, decarbonization, and modernization of facilities across the University of Massachusetts, Community College, and State University segments. This includes an allocation of \$500 million in targeted resources, creating dedicated funding opportunities for specific programs. The BRIGHT Act also proposes expanding the Massachusetts State College Building Authority's (MSCBA's) project scope and allows the Division of Capital Asset Management and Maintenance (DCAMM) to dispose of surplus properties in order to expedite smaller projects.

Secretary Gorzkowicz noted that the House 1 proposal will follow the standard budget process, while the BRIGHT Act will be reviewed by several committees before reaching the Governor's desk. He added that since its implementation, the Fair Share surtax has generated approximately \$2.5 billion in its first full fiscal year. In turn, forecasts of continued strong collections further support the proposed funding strategy. Secretary Gorzkowicz added that the financing model for the BRIGHT Act is inspired by successful transportation funding mechanisms established in Massachusetts, which have been effective and well-supported by the legislature.

Secretary Gorzkowicz noted that the current proposal was shaped by analyses presented to the Higher Ed Capital Working Group, which was established by the legislature in the FY '25 budget. The working group included representatives from relevant state agencies (ANF, DCAMM, Executive Office of Education), legislators, and stakeholders from various segments of higher education, including State Universities and Community Colleges. Charged with assessing capital needs and recommending how to leverage Fair Share Amendment revenues, the group reviewed issues related to deferred maintenance and decarbonization. Its final report was completed ahead of schedule in December to inform the budget process, influencing both the Governor's proposals and the bond bill. Secretary Gorzkowicz reiterated that the proposal aims to secure dedicated revenues large enough to address the growing challenges faced by campuses. While he recognized that this is not a complete solution, Secretary Gorzkowicz emphasized that it represents a significant step forward.

Secretary Gorzkowicz stated that the BRIGHT Act proposes \$2.5 billion in authorizations aimed at addressing three main challenges: decarbonization, deferred maintenance, and modernization of campuses. He stated that the BRIGHT Act includes several key policy proposals aimed at enhancing capital planning and maintenance for higher education institutions, such as:

- Expansion of the MSCBA, to broaden its scope to include Community Colleges.

- Increased authority to DCAMM to delegate structural and mechanical projects up to \$10 million to the MSCBA, providing more resources for campus projects. Provisions are also being introduced that would allow DCAMM to dispose of surplus properties at the request of campus presidents or chancellors; this would facilitate asset repurposing for educational use and allow smaller projects to proceed more quickly.

Secretary Gorzkowicz reiterated the importance of these two complementary pieces of legislation, adding that campuses are expected to see immediate benefits, especially from smaller projects that can be initiated within the next 12 to 24 months. Additionally, the Fiscal Year 2025 budget will include a pay-go component. This would allow some funds to be used for immediate capital needs, potentially mitigating existing debt and freeing up campus assets for repurposing. While larger capital projects may take four to five years, the initial phases of the BRIGHT Act will yield significant benefits in the short term by addressing immediate needs on campuses. Secretary Gorzkowicz concluded by offering to share additional materials, including the slide deck and issue briefs, to help stakeholders understand and advocate for the proposals effectively.

Commissioner Ortega expressed support for this legislative initiative, while Chair Gabrieli commended the comprehensive and ambitious nature of the BRIGHT Act, noting the enthusiasm from campuses and the importance of this initiative for public higher education.

Board Member Judy Pagliuca raised a concern regarding the legislation's emphasis on real estate and the relatively small allocation of \$20 million for technology expenditures. She further questioned the balance between addressing student needs and managing capital assets. Secretary Gorzkowicz acknowledged the challenge of keeping pace with rapid advancements in technology, emphasizing that the Bright Act primarily focuses on physical capital assets. He noted that there are other technology bond bills and authorizations available, indicating that the \$20 million allocation is not the sole resource for technological needs, but rather was intended as an incentive to encourage collaboration among campuses to streamline their technology platforms and systems, particularly for capital planning.

Chair Gabrieli thanked Secretary Gorzkowicz for his collaboration during the budget season and treating the BHE as a partner in these initiatives. He recognized the thoughtful approach of the proposals and expressed support for these initiatives.

III. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Joanna Gonsalves, President of the Massachusetts State College Association (MSCA) commented on the BRIGHT ACT and emphasized its importance amid current financial challenges at the federal level. She acknowledged the BRIGHT Act as a necessary step toward upgrading campus facilities and enhancing access to quality public higher education. Ms. Gonsalves expressed concerns which included: that the emphasis on STEM fields in the BRIGHT Act's messaging could marginalize important disciplines within the liberal arts, humanities, and social sciences; and whether funding allocations and matching fund requirements would disadvantage smaller State Universities and Community Colleges, which play vital roles in their local communities. Ms. Gonsalves also commented on existing debt policies that allow a significant portion of operational budgets to be allocated to debt service. She advocated for reducing this to 5% or lower, particularly for Community Colleges. She suggested doubling the Fair Share Amendments funds allocated for capital projects to \$250 million, with the hope of enabling more comprehensive renovations and addressing deferred maintenance. Finally, Ms. Gonsalves emphasized the need to invest in faculty and staff alongside infrastructure improvements, advocating for fair wages and quality support for students. She concluded her remarks by expressing a desire to work together to ensure that the BRIGHT Act benefits all students and campuses while maintaining affordability and accessibility in education.

IV. ACCEPTANCE OF MINUTES

Chair Gabrieli asked for a motion to accept the minutes from January 14, 2025.

With no comments noted, on a motion duly made and seconded, the motion to approve the minutes proceeded to a roll call vote and was approved unanimously by all members present as follows:

- Chair Chris Gabrieli – Yes
- Danielle Allen – Yes
- Mary Burns – Yes
- Harneen Chernow – Yes
- Ann Christenson – Yes
- Veronica Conforme – Yes
- Alex Cortez – Yes
- Paul Mattera – Yes
- Niki Nguyen - Yes
- Judy Pagliuca - Yes
- Christina Royal – Yes
- Assistant Secretary of Education, LePage – Yes
- Bill Walczak - Yes

V. BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION MOTIONS

List of Documents Used

- **BHE 25-33** Receipt of Joint DHE and DESE Report on FAFSA Completion
A. Attachment A

- **BHE 25-34** Approval of Commissioner's Annual Performance Evaluation and Compensation Adjustment
A. Attachment A
B. Attachment B

Chair Gabrieli turned to the next agenda item, which was the motion, BHE 25-33, *Receipt of Joint DHE and DESE Report on FAFSA Completion*.

The discussion of the report was led by DHE Deputy Commissioner Michael Dannenberg. He noted that the report, prepared jointly by the DHE and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) focuses on three main areas: current Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion rates, a summary of Massachusetts initiatives, and recommendations for improvement. He mentioned that Massachusetts has a higher FAFSA completion rate compared to other states, but it has decreased from 60% in 2019 to 51% today. Deputy Commissioner Dannenberg also noted disparities in completion rates among different demographics; for example, only 33% of Latino/a students complete the FAFSA before graduating from high school, and only 38% of Latino/a students go on to enroll at institutions of higher education upon completing high school.

Deputy Commissioner Dannenberg next referenced the MyCAP Program, which is a planning tool used in approximately one out of every three Massachusetts school districts that guides students through the FAFSA process and other steps toward higher education enrollment. He stated that approximately \$500,000 was invested last year to help address challenges posed by recent FAFSA reforms through the FAFSA Completion Incentive Program. Deputy Commissioner Dannenberg noted that the Massachusetts Economic Development Bill requires districts to notify students about FAFSA and provide assistance with completing the form, though it does not require completion for graduation.

Deputy Commissioner Dannenberg recommended that the Commonwealth strive for 70% FAFSA completion among all students by 2029, and approximately 50% completion in Gateway Cities through district-by-district efforts. Additionally, Deputy Commissioner Dannenberg recommended expansion of the MyCAP initiative to all districts over the next three years. He concluded by noting that the DHE is awaiting a response on the renewal of its \$35 million

federal GEAR UP application, which supports college access services such as FAFSA completion assistance.

Assistant Secretary of Education Bob LePage commended the DHE and the Commissioner for their outreach efforts, specifically the road shows aimed at educating students about FAFSA completion. Assistant Secretary LePage highlighted the importance of these sessions in terms of raising awareness among students who may be misinformed about their opportunities, and he expressed appreciation for the partnership in motivating students to share information about FAFSA and MASFA with their peers.

Chair Gabrieli expressed satisfaction with the inter-departmental collaboration reflected in the FAFSA completion report, and advocated for an "opt-out" approach to FAFSA applications, citing evidence from states with mandatory applications that have seen significant increases in FAFSA completion and college enrollment. He expressed concern over a five percent decrease in low-income, student FAFSA applicants over the past two years, which indicates a need for more proactive measures. He emphasized that while he values voluntary approaches, he believes they may not be effective enough in improving application rates, especially in light of recent data.

Deputy Commissioner Danenberg referenced a new report from Texas showing that their opt-out requirement has increased FAFSA completion rates by 7 to 9 percentage points. He also emphasized that the Healey Administration has established a council on K-12 graduation standards, which further indicates that discussions around higher education and graduation requirements remain fluid.

Noting no further comments, Chair Gabrieli called for a vote. On a motion duly made and seconded, BHE 25-33 was approved by members present through a roll call vote, as follows:

- Chair Chris Gabrieli – Yes
- Danielle Allen – Yes
- Mary Burns – Yes
- Harneen Chernow – Yes
- Ann Christenson – Yes
- Veronica Conforme – Yes
- Alex Cortez – Yes
- Paul Mattera – Yes
- Niki Nguyen - Yes
- Judy Pagliuca - Yes
- Christina Royal – Yes
- Assistant Secretary of Education, LePage – Yes
- Bill Walczak – Yes

**BHE 25-33 RECEIPT OF JOINT DHE AND DESE REPORT ON INCREASING FAFSA
AND MASFA COMPLETION**

VOTED	The Board of Higher Education (BHE) hereby receives the February 2025 report issued jointly by the Department of Higher Education and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education on Increasing Free Financial Aid (FAFSA) and Massachusetts Application for State Financial Aid (MASFA) FAFSA Completion.
Authority	M.G.L. c. 15A, §9(u) and M.G.L. c. 69, §1B
Contact	Noe Ortega, Commissioner, Department of Higher Education Russell D. Johnston, Acting Commissioner, Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

Chair Gabrieli introduced the next motion, BHE 25-34, *Approval of Commissioner's Annual Performance Evaluation and Compensation Adjustment*.

As background context for this motion, Chair Gabrieli stated that he prepared a draft evaluation for BHE review and action today. He noted that in drafting the evaluation he incorporated comments and feedback received from BHE members during the last meeting on this topic. He described his proposed draft evaluation of Commissioner Ortega's performance as positive.

Chair Gabrieli summarized the content of the evaluation. He expressed satisfaction with an increased clarity in terms of setting and completing Board and Department goals to advance higher education initiatives in partnership with various stakeholders. He emphasized that the completion of these goals would enable better alignment and synchronization in advancing higher education initiatives in partnership with various stakeholders. Chair Gabrieli further stated that his draft evaluation of Commissioner Ortega focuses on specific strategic priorities, including economic mobility, innovation, financial aid, and student success.

Chair Gabrieli acknowledged the Commissioner's efforts in fostering alignment within the organization while engaging Board members and the broader community. Member Conforme expressed her congratulations, noting the progress made in organizational alignment and the Board's engagement. Chair Gabrieli reiterated the importance of the Commissioner's open relationship with the Board and stakeholders, and expressed that effective communication is vital for moving initiatives forward.

Hearing no further comments, Chair Gabrieli called for a vote. On a motion duly made and seconded, BHE 25-34 was approved by members present through a roll call vote, as follows:

- Chair Chris Gabrieli – Yes
- Danielle Allen – Yes
- Mary Burns – Yes
- Harneen Chernow – Yes
- Ann Christenson – Yes
- Veronica Conforme – Yes
- Alex Cortez – Yes
- Paul Mattera – Yes
- Niki Nguyen - Yes
- Judy Pagliuca - Yes
- Christina Royal – Yes
- Assistant Secretary of Education, LePage – Yes
- Bill Walczak - Yes

BHE 25-34 APPROVAL OF COMMISSIONER’S ANNUAL PERFORMANCE EVALUATION AND COMPENSATION ADJUSTMENT

VOTED The Board of Higher Education hereby approves the attached Commissioner’s annual Performance Evaluation. Further, the Board approves a salary adjustment for Commissioner Ortega in alignment with the salary increases and the effective dates that the Commonwealth’s Human Resources Division (HRD) announced on July 25, 2024, for all eligible managers in the executive branch as specified in the attached Background Statement. The Board commends Commissioner Ortega and his team for their accomplishments and work, and thanks the Commissioner for his service.

Authority Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 15A, Section 6

Contact Constantia T. Papanikolaou, Chief Legal Counsel

VI. PRESENTATION AND PANEL DISCUSSION

BHE Degree Granting Authority: Proposals for Reduced Credit Degrees

Chair Gabrieli introduced the next agenda item, which is a panel discussion on reduced credit baccalaureate degree programs. By way of background he noted that Merrimack College has expressed an interest in offering one or more sub-120 baccalaureate degrees. During the

Board's December 2024 meeting members expressed an interest in hearing more, an in response to that request, Department staff have organized a panel discussion. He referenced the broader national conversation around different credit levels for degrees. He noted support for such degree programs at institutions in Rhode Island and New Hampshire, while citing Massachusetts's own unique requirement for Board program approval. Chair Gabrieli noted that Board members expressed significant interest in understanding the implications and regulatory issues surrounding reduced-credit degrees. He expressed gratitude for the panel organized by the Commissioner and his team to provide insight into the topic.

Chair Gabrieli outlined interrelated but distinct questions: 1) what are the circumstances under which the state and Board should support pilot programs for universities interested in innovative degree offerings; and 2) and what is the future of alternative degree levels that may differ from traditional 60-credit or 120-credit degrees programs.

Commissioner Ortega set the context for the panel discussion on reduced credit bachelor's degrees. He stated that Deputy Commissioner of Academic Affairs and Student Services Rick Riccardi would facilitate the discussion with the invited guests. Commissioner Ortega referenced previous discussions on this topic, including an inquiry during the Summer of 2024 and a follow-up discussion during the Board's December 2024 meeting, during which Chief Legal Counsel Dena Papanikolaou and Associate Commissioner Cindy Brown provided regulatory background, and the president of the New England Commission for Higher Education (NECHE), Larry Schall, was invited to provide insights. Commissioner Ortega clarified that the Board's discussion is focused on reduced credit bachelor's degrees --specifically degrees requiring less than 120 credit hours--rather than three-year bachelor's degrees. He noted that Massachusetts has specific regulatory and statutory definitions that must be addressed if such degrees are pursued.

Commissioner Ortega explained that the Board faces significant decisions in terms of framing and defining these degrees. He referred to materials previously provided to the Board, including the December 2024 PowerPoint by Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou, that outlined key decision points related to the topic. He reminded the Board of its recently endorsed framework, which prioritizes affordability, success, and innovation. Commissioner Ortega connected the discussion of reduced-credit degrees with the Board's broader goals of reducing student costs and time spent toward obtaining a degree, while ensuring consumer protection. He stressed the importance of transparency for students and families regarding what they can expect from these degree programs.

Nefertiti Walker, Senior Vice President at the University of Massachusetts, was the first panel member introduced by Deputy Commissioner Riccardi. Ms. Walker shared UMass's distinct perspective on the subject of reduced credit degrees as a research university, where students expect assurances that their degrees and skills will be transferable to both employers and graduate school programs. Senior Vice President Walker added that professional accreditors (e.g., AACSB, ABET) have strict credit-hour requirements that must be considered when

redesigning degree programs, and a lack of alignment among accrediting bodies could hinder graduates' professional opportunities.

Senior Vice President Walker cautioned that any move towards reduced-credit degrees should prioritize student demand, success, experience, and opportunities. She raised concerns about student readiness, academic rigor, and the structural challenges of adapting existing programs to the reduced-credit model, as a compression of coursework may encourage “surface learning” that threatens long-term educational outcomes.

Senior Vice President Walker conveyed UMass’s cautious support for the exploration of reduced-credit degrees programs, with consideration for the following:

- **Accessibility and Affordability:** Reduced credit programs could lower financial barriers, decrease loan debt, and make degrees more accessible.
- **Public Perception:** A more affordable, shorter degree could enhance the perceived value of higher education.
- **Meeting Student Demand:** While global models exist for reduced credit degrees, more local market research is needed to gauge demand.
- **Addressing Enrollment Declines:** This approach could help diversify enrollment opportunities amid declining numbers in the Northeast.

Senior Vice President Walker urged the need for caution in advancing discussions, advocating for specificity in program design, alignment with accrediting bodies, and maintaining a student-centric focus throughout the process.

Deputy Commissioner Riccardi introduced President Frederick Clark of Bridgewater State University as the next panel member. President Clark expressed gratitude for the opportunity to speak and endorsed the comments made by his colleague from UMass. He urged the Board to be mindful of both local and national contexts while studying the implications of reduced-credit programs. He highlighted that public higher education in Massachusetts is already one of the most affordable options for obtaining a bachelor's degree, thanks to programs such as MassEducate and MASSGrant Plus, which have significantly reduced student debt. He noted that Bridgewater State University has managed to decrease average student debt from \$26,000 to \$24,000 over five years.

President Clark emphasized that employers are seeking graduates with broad, adaptable skills rather than specific specializations. Citing surveys from the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU), he stated that employers value skills such as critical thinking, teamwork, cultural competence, and effective communication—skills best developed through liberal arts education. He opined that reducing credit requirements from 120 credits to 90 credits could negatively impact the liberal arts components essential for developing these skills. President Clark mentioned that many students at Bridgewater State University engage in undergraduate research, internships, and capstone projects, which are vital for building citizenship and life skills. He expressed concern that reduced credit programs might limit these opportunities and in turn, impact students' overall educational experiences. He also echoed accreditation-related concerns

over the possibility that graduates of reduced-credit degree programs would be ineligible for admission into graduate school.

President Clark raised concerns that a focus on reduced credit programs could channel low-income and students of color into less rigorous paths, potentially depriving them of transformational educational experiences. He urged the Board to uphold the values of a liberal arts education and preserve the associated rich, transformative educational experiences. He concluded by emphasizing that Massachusetts should remain a higher education leader that prepares students for the complex modern workforce instead of following trends that may diminish educational depth.

Deputy Commissioner Riccardi introduced President Pam Eddinger of Bunker Hill Community College as the next panel member. President Eddinger expressed her admiration for the thoughtful contributions from her colleagues at UMass and the State Universities. She explained the typical structure of a 120-credit program, which consists of 30 credits for general education, 60 credits for the major, and 30 credits for electives and capstone experiences. President Eddinger explained that transitioning to a 90-credit program would likely result in a structure consisting of 15 credits of general education, 60 credits for the core, and 15 credits for electives and capstones, while conveying her hope that liberal arts requirements would not be completely eliminated.

President Eddinger acknowledged various factors driving the conversation around reduced-credit degrees, including participation rates, financial considerations, and partnerships across educational sectors. She highlighted the continuous demand from employers, emphasizing the need for both content skills and the broader skills associated with a well-rounded education. She stated that the movement towards reduced-credit degrees reflects broader trends in higher education, such as the blurring of traditional educational silos between K-12 and higher education. She noted the importance of recognizing non-credit pathways, microcredentials, and competency-based education as part of a more nuanced approach to education.

President Eddinger pointed out that community colleges across the nation have begun offering bachelor's degrees, particularly in applied sciences, and that there is a growing need for such options in Massachusetts. She highlighted geographical locations, such as Springfield and Lawrence, where there are no local public baccalaureate options, and she further discussed the potential for community colleges to meet the demand for programs such as nursing. President Eddinger further emphasized that educational needs vary significantly by region, suggesting that a one-size-fits-all solution would not be effective. She also advocated for recognizing the specific needs of different communities when considering the implementation of reduced-credit programs.

President Eddinger encouraged collaboration among different educational institutions to create diverse solutions that benefit students as they transition from community colleges to four-year

universities. She concluded by expressing optimism about the future of higher education in Massachusetts and the importance of working together to navigate these changes.

Provost Sean Condon from Merrimack College was introduced by Deputy Commissioner Riccardi as the next panel member. Provost Condon expressed gratitude for the opportunity and emphasized that reduced-credit degrees could significantly lower costs and completion time, potentially offering a 25% reduction without requiring additional state aid. He highlighted the importance of addressing student debt and the perception of college value. He argued that a 90-credit bachelor's degree is a reasonable and rigorous option, challenging the long-standing 120-credit standard established in the 1920s.

Provost Condon proposed that educational rigor should be measured by learning outcomes rather than credit hours, suggesting that core and major requirements can be met within a 90-credit framework for many degree paths. He noted that many international institutions offer three-year degrees that are widely accepted by employers, and he emphasized that a reduced credit model aligns with global education practices. Provost Condon pointed out that many graduate programs already accept international three-year degrees, indicating a precedent for reduced credit pathways.

Provost Condon mentioned a growing national movement aimed at addressing affordability and completion issues in higher education, suggesting that many institutions are seeking alternatives to traditional degree structures. He referenced NECHE's development of a process for reduced credit degrees, which includes consumer protection measures and data requirements to ensure transparency for students. He argued that institutions could implement these programs without significant additional costs while providing valuable opportunities for students. He expressed strong belief in the potential of reduced credit degrees and argued that the time to act is now.

Deputy Commissioner introduced Dr. Zemsky, a Professor of Policy Organizations Leadership and Systems Division, as well as Chair of the Learning Alliance for Higher Education at the University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Zemsky expressed his gratitude for the opportunity to speak and shared insights from his research, particularly the "College Stress Test," which revealed that nearly half of freshmen do not return for their second year, indicating a significant retention issue in higher education. Dr. Zemsky cited a survey from the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, where many students expressed that the curriculum felt like a waste of time and money, emphasizing the need for a reevaluation of educational structures.

Dr. Zemsky argued that the current higher education system is outdated and needs fundamental rethinking rather than merely adhering to traditional standards like the 120-credit requirement established in the early 20th century by the Carnegie Foundation. Dr. Zemsky proposed that institutions should be allowed to experiment with reduced credit programs, viewing these changes as potential pilots rather than wholesale transformations. He advocated for a cautious approach to implementing reduced credit degrees, encouraging institutions to test these ideas and report on their outcomes. He emphasized the importance of using data from sources like

IPEDS to analyze demographics, financial aid impacts, and career choices of graduates from these programs.

Dr. Zemsky highlighted the collaborative nature of discussions among institutions involved in exploring reduced credit options, emphasizing a willingness to share findings and learn from each other. He expressed hope that these initiatives would lead to thoughtful experimentation rather than rushed implementations. He concluded by reinforcing the need for a balanced approach, encouraging experimentation while remaining open to learning from the outcomes, thus fostering innovation in higher education for the future.

Board Member Danielle Allen thanked the panelists for their thoughtful contributions and stressed the overwhelming challenges of cost and affordability in higher education. She viewed the conversation about reduced-credit degrees as an opportunity for significant change that could potentially address these issues. Coming from a liberal arts background, however, she expressed a desire to ensure that the core components of education, as articulated by President Condon, remain essential rather than optional in any new degree structures.

Board Member Bill Walczak brought attention to the specific context of Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) programs, considering the significant need for more nursing graduates in Massachusetts. He noted that the state needs an additional 1,000 to 1,500 nursing graduates annually to meet healthcare demands, particularly in hospitals. He discussed the financial impact of the current nursing shortage on healthcare costs and competitiveness in Massachusetts, where healthcare expenses are notably high. Member Walczak mentioned that many nurses are not in favor of the idea of reduced-credit programs, yet he acknowledged the potential benefits of such a program as a tool to address broader healthcare and economic issues. He also expressed his inclination to support the initiative as a means to improve healthcare outcomes and competitiveness in the state.

Board Member Christina Royal acknowledged the resistance often faced by innovative ideas in higher education. She emphasized the importance of allowing institutions to evolve and experiment with new offerings, particularly in response to differing regional needs. She advocated for supporting institutions that wish to pilot out-of-the-box ideas, using these initiatives to inform future policies. Finally, she highlighted the challenge of student retention, noting that reducing time to degree completion is critical, provided that academic rigor is maintained.

Board Member Chernow pointed out the need to differentiate between the proposal for three-year bachelor's degrees and the authorization for community colleges to offer bachelor's degrees, noting that these are separate but sometimes overlapping issues. She cautioned against making direct comparisons with other states or countries that have different educational systems and histories, emphasizing the uniqueness of Massachusetts. She raised concerns about the potential creation of a two-track system that might favor certain groups over others, particularly regarding access to degrees and post-graduation opportunities.

Board Member Ann Christenson highlighted the need to consider student demand, as she noted that many students feel the current system does not provide value and seek alternative educational paths. She inquired how the panelists would respond to students who perceive a lack of value in traditional education.

Board Member Alex Cortez acknowledged the importance of balancing that which educational institutions believe students need with that which students actually want based on their definitions of success. He expressed concern about the potential lack of acceptance for three-year degrees in certain industries and the need to evaluate the value of such degrees in the job market. He stressed the importance of establishing metrics to assess the value of new degree programs as well as existing ones, including economic mobility, return on investment, and student satisfaction. He noted that many existing four-year programs also fail to provide the necessary skills and satisfaction, highlighting the need for a reevaluation of educational quality. Member Cortez argued that technical skills should not be seen as separate from durable skills, suggesting that all courses should incorporate elements like ethics, civics, and professional development to ensure comprehensive education. He concluded by expressing openness to exploring three-year degrees in appropriate markets, provided that their value is measured alongside traditional pathways.

Board Member Mattera expressed his agreement with President Clark's comments and emphasized the need to consider both the implications of moving towards three-year degrees and the role of community colleges in offering three or four-year degrees. Member Mattera noted that discussions about reducing historical roles and blurring educational segments in Massachusetts reflect the need for a broader conversation about the state's segmental higher education system. He suggested that the Board might not be fully prepared for this larger discussion but recognized its importance in the context of evolving educational structures.

Board Member Pagliuca highlighted the importance of understanding how the state's educational system serves the needs of businesses, suggesting engagement with the Chamber of Commerce and other entities to gather insights into the utility of three-year degrees. She referenced the "Managing the Future of Work" project at Harvard Business School, noting concerns about credential inflation and the disconnect between what students perceive as value and what employers require. She raised the issue of a skills gap, questioning why employers continue to report dissatisfaction with the skills of incoming graduates if the education system is effective. Member Pagliuca addressed the suggestion of increasing financial aid, stating that it is not a feasible solution due to budget constraints and the challenge of funding such initiatives. She stressed the importance of responding to various stakeholders to avoid falling out of sync with labor market needs, emphasizing the necessity of embracing innovation in a collaborative manner.

Chair Gabrieli expressed gratitude for the panelists and the insightful discussion. He suggested revisiting the panel for additional feedback, emphasizing that no votes would be taken during

the meeting. He outlined two main contexts for the Board's future consideration: evaluating specific proposals from higher education institutions to pilot new degree formats, and discussing the broader implications for the entire higher education system in Massachusetts. He stressed the importance of maintaining a distinction between these contexts, recognizing that they involve different scales and considerations.

Dr. Robert Zemsky expressed appreciation for the Board's engagement in the discussion of reduced-credit programs and praised the quality of the questions raised during the discussion. He addressed the concern about creating a two-track system between selective and non-selective institutions, noting that while the University of Pennsylvania is not pursuing a three-year degree, many competitive institutions are considering it. He mentioned that a forthcoming website would list 47 institutions participating in this initiative, all of which are strong institutions.

Dr. Zemsky shared that many faculty members considered three-year degrees to be a liberating opportunity to rethink traditional educational structures. He also indicated that this initiative is gaining traction nationally and expressed his desire for Massachusetts to join this movement by experimenting with new educational models.

Provost Condon echoed the sentiments of his peers, highlighting the need to reassess what is essential in a bachelor's degree. He acknowledged that not all students may be interested in a three-year degree but emphasized its potential to address significant challenges in higher education, particularly in New England and Massachusetts. He argued against simply adhering to traditional credit requirements, advocating instead for a focus on what is truly impactful in students' education. He expressed a desire for the opportunity to offer this option to students without having to modify the institution's charter, as this could enhance student choice in Massachusetts.

President Eddinger acknowledged that reduced-credit degrees are already being implemented across the country, indicating that the conversation is already evolving. She shared her worries about the potential for creating a two-track educational system but also pointed out that students can transition from community colleges to prestigious institutions like Columbia University. President Eddinger also stressed that students are adults who will pursue options that serve their best interests, and encouraged the Board to focus on the broader ecosystem of higher education and how current discussions will shape the future landscape over the next decade.

President Clark affirmed that no one opposes innovation, referencing Bridgewater State University's ongoing efforts to revise its core curriculum and adapt to evolving employer needs. He accentuated the importance of a well-rounded education, advocating for graduates who possess diverse perspectives that enhance problem-solving and creative thinking. However, he cautioned against hastily blurring the lines between educational segments without thorough analysis. He noted Massachusetts' strong economy and educated workforce, arguing against

reducing degree credits without consulting employers. President Clark highlighted high student job placement rates and mentioned that issues with student retention primarily occur between the first and second years, not during the transition from three to four years. He expressed worries about creating a two-track system that could disadvantage low-income students and students of color, advocating for a more equitable approach to education reform.

Senior Vice President Walker echoed sentiments about the need to reassess assumptions regarding educational value, core curriculum, and workforce alignment. She stressed the importance of ensuring that educational pathways meet the diverse needs of students across different demographic groups within the UMass system.

Chair Gabrieli expressed appreciation for the Board's rich discussions, and recognized the diverse perspectives shared by the panelists and Board members. He emphasized the importance of moving beyond discussion to actionable steps, signaling his intent to focus on practical outcomes from the conversation. He acknowledged that although such issues often lead to differing views, both BHE and DHE play a role in navigating these complexities.

VII. REMARKS & REPORTS

A. Chair's Remarks

Chair Gabrieli confirmed he would defer his remarks entirely, given his extensive participation in the meeting's prior discussions.

B. Secretary of Executive Office of Education's (EOE) Remarks

Assistant Secretary LePage indicated he had no remarks to give on behalf of the Secretary of Education.

C. Reports from Presidents

State University Segmental Report

[For a copy of President Linda Thompson's full remarks, please see here:](#)

Westfield State University President Linda Thompson provided an update on behalf of the State University segment. She stated that Westfield State University hosted a second annual Keeper of the Dream Dinner to commemorate Black History Month. The event featured a keynote address from Nettie Washington Douglass, who is a descendant of Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington. The event also recognized four students with scholarships and awarded six community members for their contributions to social justice and equity. President Thompson expressed gratitude for the support shown by state leaders concerning recent executive orders that could undermine efforts in higher education and reiterated the commitment of the Massachusetts State University Council of Presidents to provide a high-quality, equitable education free from discrimination and intolerance.

President Thompson stated that she supported President Clark's views from the panel discussion on sub-120 credit bachelor's degree programs, emphasizing the need to evaluate changes through an educational rather than marketing lens. She highlighted that Massachusetts state universities are already the most affordable pathways to a degree and cautioned against the potential devaluation of liberal arts and humanities education.

Community College Segmental Report

[For a copy of President Luis Pedraja's full remarks, please see:](#)

Quinsigamond Community College President Luis Pedraja thanked Secretary Gorzkowicz for the discussion surrounding the BRIGHT Act and House 1 proposal, which he described as revolutionary for capital planning in Massachusetts higher education. He expressed confidence in the strategy and the Community Colleges' partnership with the administration as the proposal progresses through legislative and budget processes. While supportive of the BRIGHT Act's intent, he raised concerns about the allocation of funding, specifically the proposed distribution of \$1.25 billion to UMass and \$1.25 billion split between State Universities and Community Colleges. He argued that this distribution could exacerbate existing funding gaps, given that UMass has a larger capacity for capital planning and serves fewer students than the Community Colleges.

President Pedraja urged the legislature to consider a more equitable funding distribution in the BRIGHT Act. He appreciated the ongoing conversations regarding reduced-credit degrees and expressed eagerness for further discussions on the topic. He also acknowledged President Eddinger for representing the Community College segment's perspective in these discussions.

President Pedraja highlighted the critical need to address compensation for community college faculty and staff, especially as free-community college initiatives such as MassEducate are implemented. He stressed that appropriate compensation is essential for the success of these initiatives.

D. Report from Student Advisory Council (SAC)

BHE Student Member Niki Nguyen addressed the Board, highlighting recent federal changes affecting DEI initiatives and immigration policies that have created uncertainty and anxiety among students, faculty, and staff. She noted that many students come from immigrant families or know individuals affected by these changes, which have led to significant impacts on their well-being. Students are seeking reassurance and support from institutional leadership in light of these challenges.

Member Nguyen expressed gratitude to Commissioner Ortega for his recent statement supporting equity, access, and opportunity, but she also urged further action such as the the implementation of guidelines to better inform students about the implications of national changes

at the institutional level. She advocated for clear communication regarding available resources and opportunities for students to engage in discussions about controversial issues in order to feel a sense of belonging and academic freedom within their institutions. She respectfully requested that the Board and the Department address these concerns in order to reinforce Massachusetts' values of equity, inclusion, and student support.

E. Commissioner's Report

Commissioner Ortega thanked Chair Gabrieli and Board Member Nguyen for their contributions to the meeting. He reflected on the historical context of higher education in Massachusetts, noting the evolution of institutions in response to community needs. Commissioner Ortega also restated the Board's continued commitment to equity and highlighted the importance of an educational system that reflects the diverse backgrounds and experiences of students and families.

Commissioner Ortega discussed the importance of addressing affordability and success in higher education while considering both individual and societal benefits. He stressed that these priorities require innovation in order to ensure that all learners can benefit from higher education. He announced that the Department is actively working to incorporate these priorities into its website and initiatives to align with the Board's goals. He also mentioned the integration of various reports and strategic plans related to equity, including the State Higher Education Finance (SHEF) and the New Undergraduate Experience initiative.

Commissioner Ortega committed to apprising the Board of any developments, particularly regarding federal changes that may impact higher education. He expressed appreciation to institutional leaders, faculty, and staff for their efforts to support students amid ongoing challenges.

Board Member Chernow praised the strength of Commissioner Ortega's letter regarding DEI changes and the impact on higher education. She supported the idea of crafting a public statement to signal support for students during these challenging times, emphasizing the need for institutional reassurance.

Student Member Thalles De Souza shared insights from his experience as a student government president at Cape Cod Community College, noting a sense of anxiety among students. He expressed appreciation for the Board's responsiveness and the support shown to students.

Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou assured the Board that she is working closely with the Executive Office of Education and the Attorney General's Office to provide responsive guidance on federal changes. Chief Counsel Papanikolaou further committed to sharing guidance with the board as it becomes available, particularly regarding DEI and immigration policies.

VIII. OTHER BUSINESS

None

IX. ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 12:56 p.m.

*Respectfully Submitted,
Noe Ortega,
Commissioner and Secretary to the Board*