

## MASSACHUSETTS BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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April 08, 2025

10:00 p.m.

Via Zoom

### Meeting Minutes

A meeting of the Board of Higher Education (BHE or Board) was held on Tuesday, April 8, 2025, remotely via teleconference (Zoom).

The following Board Members were present:

Chris Gabrieli, Chair

Harneen Chernow, Vice Chair

Danielle Allen

Mary Burns

Ann Christensen

Veronica Conforme

Alex Cortez

Bob LePage, Secretary of Education Designee

Paul Mattera

Niki Nguyen, Voting Student Member, University of Massachusetts Segment

Christina Royal

Bill Walczak

Judy Pagliuca

Noe Ortega, Commissioner and Secretary to the Board

The following Board Members or Advisors were absent:

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

Thalles De Souza, non-voting Student Advisor, Community College segment

### I. CALL TO ORDER

Board Chair Chris Gabrieli called the meeting to order at 10:03 a.m. Roll call attendance was taken (see above for attendance roster).

Chair Gabrieli noted the meeting is a regularly scheduled session with an efficient agenda and planned remarks from various participants. He mentioned that he has initiated discussions with Vice Chair Chernow and Board members to reconsider the format of their meetings, aiming to find a balance between regularly scheduled meetings, occasional retreats, and focused, special sessions.

## **II. REMARKS**

### **A. Board of Higher Education Chair**

Chair Gabrieli reviewed the agenda items for today's meeting noting that he thought they represented the kind of important work that the Board, as the statewide regulatory entity, should be doing. He acknowledged the shifting, challenging national context and how it may feel odd doing regular business during irregular times. He underlined the importance of recognizing the wisdom to know about and act on things we can change to make a difference, the courage to press ahead when we cannot, and having the courage to act.

### **B. Secretary of Education**

Assistant Secretary Bob LePage, standing in for Secretary Tutwiler as his designee, echoed Chair Gabrieli's sentiments, expressing appreciation for collaboration between the Board and partner institutions and agencies in supporting students amidst turbulent times.

### **C. Presidents**

#### Community College Segmental Report

Quinsigamond Community College President Luis Pedraja addressed the Board on behalf of the Community College Council of Presidents, highlighting the vibrant atmosphere on campuses as spring approaches, with increased student engagement and activities. He reported a significant enrollment increase, with his campus experiencing a 21.4% rise in enrollment in Fall 2024 and an overall increase of about 18% enrollment increase among Community Colleges this spring. While acknowledging ongoing federal uncertainties, he reaffirmed the Community Colleges'

commitment to their mission of accessible education, referring to today's agenda item on the promulgation of the Massachusetts Inclusive Postsecondary Education (MAIPSE) regulations as an example. He added that the Community Colleges are advocating for a budget increase to support free community college initiatives and funding for high-demand short-term workforce training programs, which currently require out-of-pocket payments from students. President Pedraja further stated that other funding priorities include capital improvements, continuation of Early College programs, and an increase in SUCCESS funding to \$21 million, all of which are aimed at improving student completion rates.

President Pedraja reiterated that despite increased enrollment, the Community Colleges face difficulties in recruiting and retaining qualified staff due to compensation issues, as Massachusetts Community College salaries are significantly lower than the national average and in comparison, to four-year institutions. He concluded with a call to invest in educators and professional staff to sustain Massachusetts' role as a national leader in higher education.

Chair Gabrieli referenced the Commission on Higher Education Quality and Affordability (CHEQA), highlighting recent discussions on faculty recruitment and retention, and encouraged Board members to explore the work of CHEQA for deeper insights into the challenges mentioned.

### State University Segmental Report

Westfield State University President Linda Thompson provided an update on behalf of the State Universities Council of Presidents, expressing gratitude for the Healey-Driscoll administration's introduction of the BRIGHT Act, which aims at addressing significant capital and maintenance needs in public higher education. President Thompson supported the Governor's proposal for \$125 million in funding through special obligation bonds, emphasizing the long-overdue opportunity to modernize campus infrastructure, which has not been the subject of significant financial investment over the past 20 years. She added that the Council of Presidents advocated for the restoration and increase of funding for State University performance and MASSGrant Plus Expansion programs to maintain accessibility and affordability for students. They also submitted requests for one-time investments to keep costs low.

President Thompson reported that the State Universities requested \$125 million to address critical repairs through the DCAMM's deferred maintenance line and sought \$45.7 million to eliminate legacy debt, allowing for reallocation towards technology upgrades. She echoed concerns previously raised by President Clark regarding new proposals for shorter degree programs, arguing they could devalue liberal arts and humanities education and hinder the

incorporation of essential experiences such as internships. President Thompson concluded with a call for proactive investments in public higher education in light of potential federal funding cuts, reaffirming the commitment of Massachusetts institutions to provide a supportive and diverse learning environment despite external challenges.

#### Report from Student Advisory Council (SAC)

BHE Student Member Niki Nguyen presented on behalf of the Student Advisory Council, expressing gratitude to the Board and college administrators for improved communication and resources addressing student concerns. She highlighted students' anxiety surrounding recent federal changes impacting DEI initiatives and immigration policies, which have created uncertainty about their educational paths amid diminished support systems. She noted that many students are struggling with competition for internships and job opportunities, as well as securing funding to maintain scholarships and financial aid as they approach the end of the semester. Student Member Nguyen emphasized the need for continued and innovative strategies to support all students, particularly those who are part of underrepresented groups.

Chair Gabrieli commended Student Member Nguyen for her commitment to representing student voices and balancing her responsibilities, noting her impactful advocacy for mental health and student support during Board discussions.

#### D. Commissioner

Commissioner Ortega welcomed everyone and acknowledged the vibrant atmosphere on college campuses in April, marked by final exams and commencement preparations, while also noting the challenges arising from recent developments in the national context. He emphasized the importance of our international students, who significantly contribute to campus diversity and culture, and acknowledged the challenges they face, urging continued support to ensure they feel safe and focused on their studies.

With the month of April recognized as National Sexual Assault Awareness and Prevention Month, Commissioner Ortega highlighted Department efforts to enhance policies protecting students. He recognized the Department's Campus Safety Advisor, Amanda Robbins, for organizing training sessions aimed at improving Title IX investigations and support for neurodiverse students. He encouraged institutions to utilize the resources provided by the Department to enhance campus safety and support systems for students.

Commissioner Ortega also expressed appreciation to Board members and others for joining the recent launch of the Innovation Hub, which was launched based on a \$2.1 million grant. The Innovation Hub will support initiatives aimed at increasing college access and affordability and enhancing student success. He concluded his remarks by expressing gratitude for the Board's support and for partnerships in advancing these initiatives.

### **III. BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION MOTIONS**

#### List of Documents Used

[BHE 25-36](#) Approval and Adoption of 610 CMR 15.00: Massachusetts Inclusive Postsecondary Education Initiative Program Guidelines

Chair Gabrieli asked for a motion to approve BHE 25-36, *Approval and Adoption of 610 CMR 15.00: Massachusetts Inclusive Postsecondary Education Initiative Program Guidelines* which was so moved by Member Alex Cortez and seconded by Member Mary Burns.

DHE Chief Legal Counsel Dena Papanikolaou provided context on the MAIPSE regulations, which aim to expand educational access for students with severe disabilities who are otherwise unable to achieve the underlying competency determinations needed to secure a high school diploma. The law mandates that public higher education institutions develop policies to support these students, including those aged 22 years and over who have aged out of the IEP process. She noted that, consistent with the Board's vote during its January 14, 2025, meeting, the Board-approved draft of these regulations was published for public comment. Public comment was received from Mass Advocates for Children, and the comments are summarized in the Board packet. The comments received were non-substantive and focused on clarifying intent and more closely aligning the regulations with statutory language as set forth in MGL c. 15A, section 30A. She added that the Department staff incorporated these suggestions into a revised, final draft that is included in the Board packet and is recommended for promulgation; the proposed changes are identified in a redline format.

Chair Gabrieli acknowledged the significance of these regulations as a step forward in promoting access and providing clear guidelines for campuses, reflecting a commitment to inclusivity. Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou highlighted the importance of the regulatory process and transparency in addressing public comments.

Hearing no further discussion, Chair Gabrieli called for a vote. On a motion duly made and seconded, BHE 25-36 was approved unanimously by all members present through a roll call vote, as follows:

- Chris Gabrieli, Chair - Yes

- Mary Burns - Yes
- Harneen Chernow - Yes
- Danielle Allen - Yes
- Ann Christensen - Yes
- Alex Cortez - Yes
- Bob LePage - Yes
- Paul Mattera - Yes
- Niki Nguyen - Yes
- Judy Pagliuca - Yes
- Christina Royal - Yes
- Bill Walczak - Yes

#### **BHE 25-36**

#### **APPROVAL AND ADOPTION OF 610 CMR 15.00: MASSACHUSETTS INCLUSIVE POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION INITIATIVE PROGRAM GUIDELINES**

#### **VOTED**

The Board of Higher Education ("Board" or "BHE"), having solicited and reviewed public comment in accordance with the Administrative Procedure Act, M.G.L. c. 30A, § 3, hereby adopts the following final regulation 610 CMR 15.00: Massachusetts Inclusive Postsecondary Education Initiative Program Guidelines, as set forth in Attachment A.

#### **Authority**

M.G.L. c. 15A, § 9(u) and § 30A; M.G.L. c. 71B, § 17; and Sections 12, 22, 36, 165 and 168 of Chapter 126 of the Acts of 2022, as amended by Sections 56 and 57 of Chapter 2 of the Acts of 2023, and as further amended by Sections 23 and 26 of Chapter 206 of the Acts of 2024

#### **Contact**

Constantia T. Papanikolaou, Chief Legal Counsel  
Richard Riccardi, Deputy Commissioner for Academic Affairs and Student Success

### **IV. COMMISSIONER'S SPOTLIGHT**

- [\*\*BHE Degree Granting Authority: Proposals for Reduced Credit Degrees\*\*](#)

Chair Gabrieli next introduced a presentation on the Board's ongoing conversation about degree requirements, particularly regarding the potential for colleges to grant baccalaureate degrees requiring fewer than 120 credits. He emphasized the need for clarity in the regulatory

process for colleges wishing to propose alternative degree structures and acknowledged differing opinions on the matter.

Commissioner Noe Ortega confirmed the focus on reduced credit degree proposals and explained that this discussion has been ongoing, with input from various stakeholders, including institutions and accrediting bodies like the New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE). He outlined the Board's intention to explore a regulatory framework that would permit the Board to consider pilot proposals, which would not permanently change existing regulations but could inform future decisions based on pilot outcomes.

Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou provided insight into the existing regulatory framework, explaining the Board has regulatory authority, in varying degrees, over all public and private (independent) higher education institutions located or operating in the Commonwealth. She stated that current Board regulations require a minimum of 120 credits for a bachelor's degree. She further acknowledged the need for flexibility in regulatory language to accommodate pilot proposals. Current regulations do not allow for applications that deviate from established credit requirements, which presents a barrier to exploring reduced credit degree options.

Commissioner Ortega proposed the development of draft regulatory language to facilitate pilot proposals without permanently altering existing regulations. This approach would allow for experimentation and data collection, informing future regulatory changes based on pilot outcomes. The regulatory framework would need to consider various factors, including student outcomes, program quality, and alignment with workforce needs, as well as the feedback received from stakeholders. He cited that the plan moving forward includes presenting a draft pilot regulation proposal for the Board's consideration at an upcoming meeting, preparing the necessary policy framework, and determining how to address any potential proposals.

Chair Gabrieli reiterated the importance of the Board's involvement in discussions surrounding the proposed regulatory changes for reduced-credit degrees, emphasizing the need for a structured process. He pointed out that, despite ongoing discussions, the Board has yet to receive a formal application for a reduced-credit degree program due in part to the present lack of a clear regulatory pathway for doing so. Chair Gabrieli expressed the need for a mechanism that allows institutions to propose innovative programs without overhauling existing regulations, referencing NECHE's approach, which permits institutions to apply for waivers from NECHE standards to pilot new programs. Chair Gabrieli said that establishing a regulatory pathway is crucial for colleges to innovate and respond to changing educational needs. Without

this, institutions might resort to seeking legislative changes, which he opined “could be more cumbersome.”

Board Member Paul Mattera raised concerns about the process and emphasized the need for consensus among Board members before proceeding with any regulatory changes. He questioned how to reconcile existing statutory requirements with the proposed regulatory flexibility, expressing unease about the potential for overlapping roles among different educational segments and cautioning against blurring boundaries without thorough discussion. He underscored the need for deeper Board engagement and consensus on the implications of such regulatory changes before moving forward with drafting new policies. Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou confirmed that the minimum credit-hour requirements for degrees are defined in regulations, not statute. This distinction does not require legislative action and allows the Board potential flexibility.

Chair Gabrieli referenced NECHE's “Policy on Innovation” guidance for institutions preparing proposals to offer baccalaureate degrees of fewer than 120 credits as a model that the Board could follow, suggesting that it allows for innovation while maintaining high programmatic standards. He stated that establishing a regulatory pathway would enable institutions to explore new degree models, allowing for experimentation without permanently altering existing regulations.

Board Member Christina Royal inquired about past examples where a NECHE-approved pilot program may have contradicted Board regulations, and whether multiple colleges could pursue different pilot models simultaneously. Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou explained that NECHE approved the Merrimack proposal subject to the Board's review, which is not typical. In the typical process, NECHE approval follows Board action- meaning that the Board typically goes first.

Commissioner Ortega highlighted that the regulatory framework could explore various pilot program configurations beyond just offering a sub-120 credit degree, including potential partnerships and innovative pathways to address workforce shortages. He emphasized that proposed pilots could foster creative solutions and collaborations, expanding the potential benefits of new degree structures while ensuring quality and accountability. Chair Gabrieli noted that the NECHE pilot pathway was developed in response to requests from institutions across multiple states, highlighting the importance of having a consistent approach in Massachusetts that aligns with accrediting bodies.



Vice Chair Harneen Chernow inquired about Massachusetts' participation in the State Authorization Reciprocity Agreement (SARA), which allows Massachusetts institutions to offer programs in other states without additional regulatory approval. Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou confirmed that under the SARA compact, a Massachusetts resident can enroll in an online program offered in Massachusetts by an institution operating in another member state.

Vice Chair Chernow asked whether permitting institutions of higher education to offer sub-120 credit baccalaureate degrees might open opportunities for community colleges to offer bachelor's degrees, themselves. Chair Gabrieli responded that the proposed regulatory changes would create pathways for both public and private institutions to explore innovative degree options without fundamentally changing existing regulations or other requirements.

Assistant Secretary LePage asked whether the potential regulation would allow flexibility across all levels of credentials, including associate and master's degrees, or if it would be specific to bachelor's degrees. Commissioner Ortega noted that a pilot program could explore various configurations of degrees and their impact on student outcomes, emphasizing the need for evidence-based approaches to inform future decisions.

Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou highlighted the necessity of ensuring that any new proposals align with consumer protection regulations, which would include maintaining transparency and accountability for students regarding the quality of academic work and career readiness. She clarified that a new, innovation-focused regulation had not yet been drafted, and reiterated that today's discussion is intended to help inform the drafting process.

Board Member Alex Cortez emphasized on the need for clarity on the purpose and implications of introducing three-year degrees. He expressed the importance of understanding the potential value to students, institutions, and employers, advocating for a rigorous evaluation of any proposals.

Board Member Walczak highlighted the critical shortage of Massachusetts graduates with Bachelor's Degrees in Nursing Science, suggesting that innovative degree paths could help address this issue. He pointed out that many states have already implemented such solutions, indicating a pressing need for Massachusetts to consider similar options.

Board Member Allen stressed the necessity of allowing space for experimentation in higher education, particularly considering significant economic transformations. She said it was important to develop pathways for innovation to keep pace with changing conditions.

Chair Gabrieli thanked members for the discussion and acknowledged the Board's diverse array of opinions regarding the proposed regulatory pathways. He indicated that while there may be hesitations, a draft regulation should be prepared for the next meeting, allowing for further discussion. Board Member Royal suggested creating broad guidelines for institutions to submit proposals for innovative degrees, emphasizing the need for simplicity in the process and encouraging creativity without overwhelming bureaucracy. The goal would be to support institutions while maintaining quality and accountability.

Commissioner Ortega summarized thanked members for the discussion and acknowledged the need for a draft regulation which incorporates the feedback from Board members.

Commissioner Ortega stated the Department's intention to present a draft regulation at an upcoming Board meeting in order to facilitate informed discussion and decision-making.

Chair Gabrieli concluded the discussion by affirming the importance of transparency and responsiveness in addressing the evolving landscape of higher education, expressing anticipation for upcoming meetings to review the draft regulation and potential proposals.

## **V. ACCEPTANCE OF MINUTES**

Chair Gabrieli sought a motion to approve the minutes from February 18, 2025.

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:

- Chris Gabrieli, Chair - Yes
- Harneen Chernow - Yes
- Danielle Allen - Yes
- Ann Christensen - Yes
- Alex Cortez - Yes

- Bob LePage - Yes
- Paul Mattera - Yes
- Niki Nguyen - Yes
- Christina Royal - Yes
- Bill Walczak - Yes

## **VI. ADJOURNMENT**

The meeting was adjourned at 11:53 p.m.

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