

## MASSACHUSETTS BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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May 20, 2025

10:00 a.m.

Via Zoom

### **Meeting Minutes**

A meeting of the Board of Higher Education (BHE or Board) was held on Tuesday, May 20, 2025, remotely via teleconference (Zoom).

The following Board Members were present:

Chris Gabrieli, Chair

Harneen Chernow, Vice Chair

Danielle Allen

Ann Christensen

Alex Cortez

Bob LePage, Secretary of Education Designee

Paul Mattera

Niki Nguyen, Voting Student Member, University of Massachusetts Segment

Christina Royal

Bill Walczak

Noe Ortega, Commissioner and Secretary to the Board

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

The following Board Members or Advisors were absent:

Judy Pagliuca

Veronica Conforme

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

### **I. CALL TO ORDER**

Board Chair Chris Gabrieli called the meeting to order at 10:05 a.m. Roll call attendance was taken (see above for attendance roster).

## **II. COMMISSIONER'S SPOTLIGHT**

Commissioner Ortega opened by noting the Department's ongoing efforts to stay proactive in addressing emerging and routine educational issues. He acknowledged that higher education institutions were still in the midst of student recruitment and emphasized the significance of Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion. Commissioner Ortega also noted that the Department has implemented increased outreach efforts to improve FAFSA completion rates among prospective students and highlighted the Department's collaboration with the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). He introduced key Department members who presented updates on FAFSA completion in Massachusetts.

Commissioner Ortega recognized the GEAR UP program for its two decades of work in improving post-secondary access, particularly through FAFSA assistance in secondary schools. Additionally, a new initiative, the "College is Possible" Ad Campaign, was introduced to raise public awareness about college opportunities.

Commissioner Ortega underscored the importance of aligning these discussions with the Board's priorities around affordability and student success, noting that FAFSA completion and public awareness are crucial for achieving these goals.

- FAFSA Completion Overview

Senior Associate Commissioner for Student Financial Assistance Robert Brun provided a status update on FAFSA completion in Massachusetts for the upcoming academic year 2025-2026. He emphasized that the Department tracks FAFSA records for all students who indicate that Massachusetts is their state of residence. He noted that FAFSA data is crucial for tracking the transition from high school to college, particularly for students who may require maximum financial aid.

Senior Associate Commissioner Brun next presented a three-year comparison of FAFSA completion data, which included first-time and returning students who completed the FAFSA by April 30 of each year. This comparison aimed to highlight trends observed in recent years. He

explained that the FAFSA processing season typically begins on October 1. The 2023-2024 season yielded typical completion statistics, with nearly 40,000 completed records. However, the 2024-2025 season faced challenges due to technical issues arising from the FAFSA Simplification Act, which delayed student record processing until April 2024.

Senior Associate Commissioner Brun explained that data from the current 2025-2026 season reflects promising FAFSA completion numbers in alignment with data from the previous year. Senior Associate Commissioner Brun also pointed out two notable trends: January is a high-volume month for FAFSA submissions, while submission numbers for February, March, and April exhibit relative stability across the past three years. He concluded his presentation by expressing optimism as the campaign progresses and reminded attendees that the current FAFSA cycle will continue until June 30, 2026.

- High School Senior FAFSA Completion

Next, DESE's College and Career Readiness Coordinator Nyal Fuentes presented FAFSA completion data specifically for high school students and addressed persistent gaps in the data. He discussed the importance of gathering and evaluating real-time FAFSA completion data, a practice initiated to help school counselors ensure that certain students access financial opportunities available in Massachusetts. Coordinator Fuentes emphasized that many families are missing out on financial aid opportunities due to FAFSA non-completion.

Coordinator Fuentes explained that the DHE has developed a FAFSA tool within "Edwin," the state's data warehouse, which provides student-level data for high school seniors and ungraded special education students. This data is crucial for identifying opportunity and achievement gaps among historically and currently marginalized populations. He presented data showing declines in FAFSA completion rates, particularly among various racial and ethnic groups, and highlighted significant gaps between low-income and non-low-income students. He discovered that low-income students, who benefit most from financial aid, are applying for FAFSA at much lower rates compared to their non-low-income peers.

Coordinator Fuentes provided current FAFSA completion rates, indicating that the state is slightly under 50% but projected to reach approximately 55% by the end of the current season. He reiterated the ongoing efforts to improve completion rates, including setting a goal of achieving 70% FAFSA completion by 2028 through collaboration between DESE and DHE. He also emphasized the importance of communicating and following up with school counselors to ensure that students complete their FAFSA applications.

Coordinator Fuentes also discussed the need to expand initiatives such as the “My Career and Academic Plan” (MyCAP) to include a focus on college affordability. Furthermore, he touted partnerships with organizations such as Massachusetts Educational Financing Authority (MEFA) and the Massachusetts School Counselors Association (MASCA) to enhance outreach efforts.

- GEAR UP

Director Robert Dais provided an overview of “Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs” (GEAR UP), which is a federally funded initiative that aims to assist economically challenged students in preparing for, entering, and succeeding in post-secondary education. He explained that the current GEAR-UP funding cycle began in 2018 and extends through 2025, and efforts are currently underway to secure future funding.

Director Dais also explained that GEAR UP's objectives include supporting students through various transitions—from middle school to high school and into post-secondary education—while increasing awareness of college requirements and financial aid, including FAFSA and MAFSFA. He mentioned that the program serves approximately 6,300 students across eight middle schools and eight high schools in Massachusetts, with a particular focus on students who qualify for free or reduced lunch.

Director Dais highlighted that GEAR UP serves diverse populations and operates in seven districts, primarily in “Gateway Cities” such as Lawrence, Lowell, Boston, and Worcester, and collaborates with community partners such as Middlesex Community College, American Student Assistance, and MassEdCo, leveraging their expertise to effectively support students and families.

Director Dais shared data on the number of students served and noted that the GEAR-UP Program also facilitates increased tutoring and support for homework, particularly in response to post-COVID attendance challenges.

- College is Possible Ad Campaign

Director Nicole Giambusso presented an overview of the efforts to publicize student financial aid programs in Massachusetts. She emphasized the importance of informing students about the increased financial aid opportunities available, particularly through the Commonwealth's new initiatives. She shared a dedicated webpage, [mass.gov/student financial aid](https://mass.gov/student-financial-aid), which is designed to provide comprehensive information on financial aid programs, including free community college options and MASSGrant Plus.

Director Giambusso discussed the "College is Possible" campaign, which runs from February 2025 through mid-May 2025. She described the campaign as a multifaceted effort targeting both adult learners and high school seniors through advertisements in English and Spanish. The campaign utilized various outreach methods, including digital ads, billboards, TV spots, and radio broadcasts, to maximize its reach across the state.

Commissioner Ortega followed up by discussing the Financial Aid Roadshow conducted by the DHE between February and March, which involved visits to eight (8) Massachusetts high schools. These visits engaged not only students but also staff and community members, fostering discussion about postsecondary success and enabling DHE to gather valuable feedback regarding improvements to student financial literacy and resource accessibility. Commissioner Ortega emphasized the critical nature of FAFSA completion, noting that students who fill out the FAFSA are nearly 92% more likely to attend college than those students who do not. He highlighted the collaboration between DHE and DESE in promoting financial aid programs and the ongoing efforts to celebrate and communicate these opportunities to students.

Board Member Danielle Allen asked about the relationship between financial barriers and other obstacles that students face when considering whether to attend college. She asked if there are targeted messaging strategies to address these barriers alongside financial aid-related information. In response, Director Robert Dais noted that the program's ability to connect with students has evolved significantly and become more effective over time. He also emphasized the potential of leveraging social media as a strategic tool to disseminate timely and accurate information about financial aid.

Commissioner Ortega added that Early College programs enhance students' academic self-esteem and provide essential guidance for first-generation college students who may lack awareness of postsecondary educational opportunities. He highlighted the importance of combating negative public narratives around the Return on Investment (ROI) of a college education - in alignment with the Board's priorities for the upcoming year - while stressing the

importance of promoting education's value, in terms of both affordability and long-term earnings potential.

Board Member Royal expressed appreciation for the multimodal approach to raising awareness of financial aid opportunities. She asked about the effectiveness of various marketing channels – specifically, whether the campaign is reaching audiences through modern platforms like YouTube, TV, and, if so, which outreach methods have proven most successful.

Commissioner Ortega acknowledged the importance of understanding student communication preferences, noting that traditional methods such as email are often ineffective in terms of connecting with students. He noted social media as a primary communication avenue and referenced feedback that the Department has received from students, which underscores the importance of building parental confidence in the value of postsecondary education. Director Giambusso added that the campaign was developed in collaboration with an advertising firm specializing in outreach to students. She emphasized that continued dialogues with students encourages them to follow through after engaging with the campaign materials, and she further stressed the need to monitor the effectiveness of different marketing strategies in terms of reaching their intended audience.

Coordinator Fuentes emphasized the importance of creating a community of practice across Massachusetts to enhance outreach efforts regarding financial aid. He noted that DESE typically targets schools and districts, working with superintendents and principals to disseminate information to over 287,000 high school students. He highlighted the need for reliable web resources to effectively communicate opportunities to families and communities, especially through local organizations such as churches.

Director Dais provided examples of successful community engagement strategies, such as hosting FAFSA completion sessions in certain communities following church services. He indicated that each completion session provided support such as multi-lingual translations, food service, and child care in order to encourage participation. He also noted a peer example, highlighting that GEAR UP students at North High School in Worcester have developed social media campaigns to inspire their peers to engage with the FAFSA process by using multiple languages to reach diverse audiences.

Commissioner Ortega concluded his remarks by acknowledging the GEAR UP program's significant work to improve college completion rates throughout Massachusetts over several decades and stressed the importance of advocacy for its continued support.

Chair Gabrieli expressed gratitude for the Department's demonstrated creativity and collaboration regarding financial aid outreach. He emphasized that financial aid outreach remains a critical area of concern, especially given recent and potential changes in federal policies impacting financial aid initiatives. Highlighting that Massachusetts ranks among the top states in the country for FAFSA completion rates, he noted that many states with higher rates have mandatory FAFSA policies with an opt-out option. Chair Gabrieli also acknowledged the positive impact of early college programs. He praised the effective use of real-time data for tracking FAFSA completion at the institutional level, commending the quality of data orchestration. However, he also underscored the need for more robust efforts to enhance outreach and support for students.

### **III. ACCEPTANCE OF MINUTES**

Chair Gabrieli asked for a motion to accept the minutes from February 25, 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:

- Chair Chris Gabrieli – Yes
- Danielle Allen – Yes
- Mary Burns – Yes
- Harneen Chernow – Yes
- Ann Christenson – Yes
- Alex Cortez – Yes
- Paul Mattera – Yes
- Niki Nguyen - Yes
- Christina Royal – Yes
- Bob LePage – Yes
- Bill Walczak - Yes

### **IV. REMARKS & REPORTS**

#### **A. Chair's Remarks**

Chair Gabrieli acknowledged challenges posed by recent policy changes at the federal level, particularly regarding budgetary considerations, and expressed hope for continued progress on initiatives such as the Bright Act. He thanked the Commissioner and the DHE team for generating momentum behind strategic priorities, such as financial aid, student success, and affordability, that align with the Board's own equity goals.

With regard to innovation, Chair Gabrieli mentioned the launch of the DHE's Innovation Hub, which supports financial aid awareness, high-value credentials, and co-op work-based learning. He expressed encouragement for the continuing discussions around Early College initiatives, which will be the focus of an upcoming Spotlight.

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

Secretary of Education designee, Bob LePage, offered brief remarks congratulating graduating students and their families, and highlighting their achievements as they transition into new opportunities within the Commonwealth. He acknowledged the hard work of teachers, professors, and administrators who support students throughout their educational journeys. Assistant Secretary LePage also reflected on significant accomplishments over the past year, such as:

- launching "Free Community College" in Massachusetts;
- expanding MassGrant program to increase access for all students;
- filing the Bright Act to modernize higher education institutions and enhance quality and technology standards;
- fostering collaboration between Community Colleges and early education programs in developing certificate programs that are specifically dedicated to developing the early education workforce;
- growing Early College initiatives, with nearly 80 high schools- now participating in such programs;
- introducing innovative career pathways while providing both sector-based strategies and work-based learning experiences in one-third of Massachusetts high schools; and
- implementing MyCAP, which seeks to improve college and career advising in over 250 high schools.

#### C. Reports from Presidents



## Community College Segmental Report

[Click here for the full report](#)

Quinsigamond Community College (QCC) President Luis Pedraja began his remarks by raising concerns over the promotion of free public four-year institutions through MASSGrant based on income, warning that this model could deplete limited financial aid resources for the entire system. He cited the Department's finite access to financial aid funds and the lack of anticipated increases for the upcoming year as reasons for concern. President Pedraja further noted that while there is legislative support "Free Community College" through MassReconnect and MassEducate, legislative support for MASSGrant is not quite as certain.

President Pedraja reflected on his time as Chair of the Community College Council of Presidents by sharing his pride in the accomplishments of Community College students, particularly as he prepares to lead a commencement ceremony for over 1,200 students at QCC. He acknowledged the challenges that students have faced, including economic pressures, and specifically highlighted how recently proposed federal budget language from would alter Pell Grant eligibility criteria and restrict student access to federal financial aid. President Pedraja explained that the proposed changes could revoke Pell eligibility for many Massachusetts students and redefine full-time status to 15 credits, which would put Community College students at risk of experiencing a substantial loss of funding. President Pedraja emphasized the need to protect Pell Grant access, as these changes could jeopardize the future of free Community College and student access. He concluded by advocating for continued funding to support student success. Finally, he commended the Massachusetts Senate for including a salary study for Community College faculty and staff as a line item in its most recent budget, as it signifies a crucial step toward improving educator pay.

## State University Segmental Report

[Click here for the full report](#)

Westfield State University President Linda Thompson began her remarks by celebrating graduation season and reflecting on her personal connection with the class of 2025, who started their college journey alongside the start of her presidency. President Thompson highlighted the annual State University Educator Alumni Awards ceremony, where nine outstanding educators were recognized for their contributions to Massachusetts public schools. She emphasized the importance of teacher preparation programs and the State Universities' role in educating over one-third of public educators in the Commonwealth.

President Thompson commented on the state legislature's pending spending bills, noting that historic investments in public higher education through the Fair Share legislation have amounted to \$1.32 billion in surplus revenues. She expressed appreciation for the House's inclusion of funding for the Department's Endowment Match Program and the Senate's \$175 million allocation for deferred maintenance capital programs for public institutions.

Regarding the Fiscal Year 2026 state budget, President Thompson acknowledged the uncertainty surrounding federal funding cuts but highlighted that both the House and Senate budgets include essential investments for State Universities. These funds are critical for keeping attendance costs manageable for students, especially those in need. She noted specific inclusions such as funding for the State University Internship Program, the Success Program, and a \$20 million increase for the MASSGrant Plus expansion. President Thompson conveyed gratitude to the legislature, the Board, and the Department for their ongoing efforts to ensure that public higher education in Massachusetts remains affordable and accessible.

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

BHE Student Member Niki Nguyen addressed the Board by acknowledging the positive atmosphere on campus as students approach the end of the semester even amid ongoing uncertainties such as funding cuts. She expressed concern that reductions in funding to programs such as TRIO, Jumpstart, and on-campus career development opportunities threaten essential support structures that help students succeed academically and thrive both personally and professionally. Student Member Nguyen emphasized that these programs are critical for providing mentorship, professional training, and internship pathways, especially for students from historically underrepresented or low-income backgrounds.

Student Member Nguyen also urged the Board to consider early strategies for addressing anticipated declines in student involvement, suggesting alternative funding pathways, strengthening public-private partnerships, and reinforcing programs that support leadership, career readiness, and civic engagement. She highlighted the importance of prioritizing student growth and leadership, even amid financial challenges, as students are both current and future stakeholders in the Commonwealth.

#### E. Commissioner's Report

Commissioner Ortega provided an update on the state budget process, expressing hope for timely progress as the Senate finalizes its budget. He emphasized the ongoing importance of affordability and access, highlighting continued investments in financial aid programs such as MASSGrant Plus, MassReconnect, and MassEducate. He also noted that student success entails not only enrollment, but also graduation and workforce entry.

Commissioner Ortega referenced a \$125 million investment in critical infrastructure as part of the budget and the Bright Act, which aims to maximize the impact of these investments on institutions. He also updated the Board on the status of potential innovation regulations, specifically related to the discussion of developing a pathway for the Board to consider reduced credit (3 year) Bachelor's degree programs. He stated that the Department is finalizing a first draft of proposed regulations, which will eventually be subject to a collaborative vetting process involving Board Members and stakeholders.

Commissioner Ortega concluded by thanking President Pedraja for his leadership as Chair of the Community College Presidents and welcomed President William Heinemann of North Shore Community College (NSCC) as the incoming chair. Commissioner Ortega also expressed gratitude to President Thompson and all of the State University presidents for their efforts in supporting their students, particularly during the commencement season.

Board Member Alex Cortez expressed excitement about the exploration of a sub-120 credit baccalaureate degree but raised concerns on whether the focus of the developing regulations will prioritize "if" over "should." He stressed the importance of having a thorough discussion about whether such a degree should be pursued, while emphasizing that the maintenance of high academic standards can help with ensuring the value of a postsecondary degree.

Chair Gabrieli acknowledged Board Member Cortez's concerns and clarified that the ongoing regulatory developments aim to align with policies and guidelines already put forth by the New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE), which provide institutions with a pathway to apply for innovative programs. He emphasized that this process should not be seen as a fast-tracking of specific proposals but rather as establishing a framework to consider proposals. Chief Legal Counsel Dena Papanikolaou confirmed that the regulations under development would allow institutions to propose, for Board consideration, innovative programs that may not align with existing BHE regulations, and she further noted that any draft regulations would be subject to public comment.

Expressing a desire to be fully informed before casting a vote, Board Member Paul Mattera sought assurance that the Department would share any draft innovation regulations with the Board and key stakeholders well in advance of the Board's upcoming June 2025 meeting to allow for thorough vetting within constituencies. Chair Gabrieli agreed with the importance of transparency and ensuring that Board members have ample time to review the proposed innovation regulations prior to voting. He also reiterated that the regulations will not dictate specific innovations but rather will create a pathway for proposals.

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

*List of documents used:*

- [BHE 25-37](#): [BHE 25-38](#): [BHE 25-39](#); and **Approval of Board of Higher Education Motions [BHE 25-40](#): [BHE 25-41](#): [BHE 25-42](#): [BHE 25-43](#): [BHE 25-44](#): [BHE 25-45](#): [BHE 25-46](#) on a Consent Agenda**

Chair Gabrieli turned to the next agenda item, which was the motion entitled: BHE 25-37, *Affirmation and Amendment of the FY2025 Endowment Incentive Program Guidelines for the FY25 GAA Budget Appropriation*.

Chair Gabrieli provided brief introductory comments and context for the motion. Hearing no further discussion, Chair Gabrieli called for a vote. On a motion duly made and seconded, BHE Motion 25-37 was unanimously approved 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
- Christina Royal - Yes
- Bill Walczak - Yes

### **[BHE 25-37](#)**

### **AFFIRMATION AND AMENDMENT OF THE FY2025 ENDOWMENT INCENTIVE PROGRAM GUIDELINES FOR THE FY25 GAA BUDGET APPROPRIATION**

**VOTED**

The Board of Higher Education hereby affirms the attached Endowment Incentive Program guidelines initially approved by the BHE in May 2022 (BHE 22-50), provided that the funding allocations and disbursement timelines are hereby amended to include the additional \$15 million in funding appropriated in the FY25 GAA Budget, as well as any additional funding appropriated through FY25 supplemental budgets, as set forth in Attachment A (as amended).

**Authority**

Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 15A, Section 15E; Section 2 of Chapter 140 of the Acts of 2024 (Line Items 1596-2425; 1596-2426); BHE 17-23; BHE 22-50; BHE 23-15; BHE 23-70; and BHE 24-11

**Contact**

Matthew Cole, Deputy Commissioner for Administration, Finance, and Operations

Chair Gabrieli introduced BHE Motion 25-38 and BHE Motion 25-39, from the Massachusetts State College Building Authority (MSCBA) for projects at Westfield State University and the Massachusetts Maritime Academy, respectively. He welcomed MSCBA representatives who were available to answer any questions. After providing brief introductory comments, he asked if Board members had any questions or comments.

Hearing no further discussion, Chair Gabrieli called for a vote to bundle for approval and approve BHE Motion 25-38 and BHE Motion 25-39. On a motion duly made and seconded, BHE Motion 25-38 and BHE Motion 25-39 were approved unanimously by all members present through a roll call vote, as follows:

- Chris Gabrieli, Chair - Yes
- Danielle Allen - Yes
- Mary Burns - Yes
- Harneen Chernow - Yes
- Ann Christensen - Yes
- Alex Cortez - Yes
- Bob LePage - Yes
- Paul Mattera - Yes
- Niki Nguyen - Yes
- Christina Royal - Yes
- Bill Walczak – Yes

**APPROVAL OF MASSACHUSETTS STATE COLLEGE BUILDING  
AUTHORITY STUDENT HOUSING RENEWAL AND ADAPTION  
PROJECT: WESTFIELD STATE UNIVERSITY APARTMENTS  
RENOVATIONS WES-0991-02**

**VOTED**

The Board of Higher Education approves the Massachusetts State College Building Authority student housing renewal and adaptation project for the Westfield State University apartments (WES-0991-02), as follows:

1. The Commissioner of the Department of Higher Education (the "Commissioner") is authorized and directed in the name and on behalf of the Board of Higher Education (the "Board") to make a written request to the Massachusetts State College Building Authority (the "Authority") that the Authority initiate the project for Westfield State University described on Exhibit A attached hereto.
2. The Bonds issued by the Authority to finance the projects for which a request is hereby authorized may be issued together with or separately from bonds issued to carry out other projects of the Authority for which the Board authorizes a request.
3. The Commissioner and all other officers of the Board, each acting singly, are authorized to request the Secretary of Administration and Finance to approve in writing the initiation by the Authority of the projects for which a request is hereby authorized, and to do such other things and take such other action as the officer so acting shall, as conclusively evidenced by the taking of such action, deem necessary or desirable to be done or taken to carry into effect the matters hereby authorized.
4. The Board and The Commonwealth of Massachusetts, acting by and through the Board, declare their official intent as referred to in Section 1.150-2 of the Treasury Regulations promulgated under the Internal Revenue Code of 1986, as amended (the "Code"), that the Commonwealth shall be reimbursed from the proceeds of tax-exempt bonds reasonably expected to be issued by the Authority expenditures temporarily advanced by the Commonwealth (including in such term the Board and the State Universities) on or after the date which is 60 days prior to the effective date of this declaration of official intent (except for

certain "preliminary expenditures" as defined in Section 1.150-2 of the Code or other amounts which are not subject to such time limitation) for projects for which a written request is hereby authorized, the maximum principal amount of such bonds expected to be issued being **\$5,000,000** for expenditures for the Project described in Exhibit A attached hereto.

**Authority**

Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 15A, Sections 4, 6, and 9; Chapter 703 of the Acts of 1963, sections 1-3, et seq., as amended

**Contact**

Matt Cole, Deputy Commissioner for Administration, Finance, and Operations

**BHE 25-39**

**APPROVAL OF MASSACHUSETTS STATE COLLEGE BUILDING AUTHORITY STUDENT HOUSING RENEWAL AND ADAPTION PROJECT: MASSACHUSETTS MARITIME ACADEMY, COMPANIES 4 & 6 RENOVATIONS**

**VOTED**

The Board of Higher Education approves the Massachusetts State College Building Authority (MSCBA) student housing renewal and adaptation project for the Massachusetts Maritime Academy, Companies 4 & 6 renovations as follows:

1. The Commissioner of the System of Public Higher Education (the "Commissioner") is authorized and directed in the name and on behalf of the Board of Higher Education (the "Board") to make a written request to the Massachusetts State College Building Authority (the "Authority") that the Authority initiate the project for Massachusetts Maritime Academy (the "Academy") described on Exhibit A attached hereto.
2. The Bonds issued by the Authority to finance the projects for which a request is hereby authorized may be issued together with or separately from bonds issued to carry out other projects of the Authority for which the Board authorizes a request.
3. The Commissioner and all other officers of the Board, each acting singly, are authorized to request the Secretary of Administration and Finance to approve in writing the initiation by the Authority of the projects for which a request is hereby

authorized, and to do such other things and take such other action as the officer so acting shall, as conclusively evidenced by the taking of such action, deem necessary or desirable to be done or taken to carry into effect the matters hereby authorized.

4. The Board and The Commonwealth of Massachusetts, acting by and through the Board, declare their official intent as referred to in Section 1.150-2 of the Treasury Regulations promulgated under the Internal Revenue Code of 1986, as amended (the "Code"), that the Commonwealth shall be reimbursed from the proceeds of tax-exempt bonds reasonably expected to be issued by the Authority expenditures temporarily advanced by the Commonwealth (including in such term the Board and the State Universities) on or after the date which is 60 days prior to the effective date of this declaration of official intent (except for certain "preliminary expenditures" as defined in Section 1.150-2 of the Code or other amounts which are not subject to such time limitation) for projects for which a written request is hereby authorized, the maximum principal amount of such bonds expected to be issued being \$5,900,000 for expenditures for the Project described in Exhibit A attached hereto.

**Authority**                      Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 15A, Sections 4, 6, and 9; Chapter 703 of the Acts of 1963, sections 1-3, et seq., as amended.

**Contact**                        Matt Cole, Deputy Commissioner for Administration & Finance

Chair Gabrieli next introduced BHE Motions 25-40 through 25-46, which set undergraduate tuition rates for the Community Colleges and State Universities. He offered introductory comments and provided context for the motions, noting the Board's authority to set tuition rates at the Community Colleges and State Universities. He explained that fees may increase even while tuition rates remain unchanged, reflecting longstanding differences in how tuition and fees are handled in Massachusetts. He also pointed out specific motions that pertain to Berkshire Community College and the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts (MCLA), which can admit a limited number of New York students at in-state tuition levels.

Deputy Commissioner for Administration, Finance, and Operations Matthew Cole confirmed that while tuition rates are held steady, fees at Community Colleges and State Universities will see increases, with limits set for Community Colleges based on the "free Community College"



legislation. He indicated that for Fiscal Year 2026, Community College fees are capped at a growth rate of 1.93%, while State Universities may see an average increase of about 3.5%.

Board Member Royal raised concerns over the unique structure of tuition and fees in Massachusetts and questioned whether this dynamic affects employer-sponsored tuition reimbursement programs. Commissioner Ortega acknowledged that the Department has received public comments regarding the reality that reimbursements do not cover the full cost due to additional fees. Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou added that communication regarding tuition waivers can be confusing for students and noted that the University of Massachusetts (UMass) system has addressed some of these issues by aligning their billing structure more closely with expectations.

Chair Gabrieli reiterated that the Board can set tuition, but lacks authority to regulate student fees, which are determined by individual campuses. He acknowledged that legislative action would be necessary to change this dynamic and welcomed Member Royal's concerns as a valid point for future consideration.

Chair Gabrieli proposed to bundle for approval and approve BHE Motion 25-40 through BHE BHE Motion 25-46. On a motion duly made and seconded, BHE Motion 25-40 through BHE Motion 25-46 were bundled and approved unanimously by all members present through a roll call vote, as follows:

- Chris Gabrieli, Chair - Yes
- Danielle Allen - Yes
- Mary Burns - Yes
- Harneen Chernow - Yes
- Ann Christensen - Yes
- Alex Cortez - Yes
- Paul Mattera - Yes
- Niki Nguyen - Yes
- Christina Royal - Yes
- Bob LePage - Yes
- Bill Walczak – Yes

Board Member Allen agreed with Board Member Royal's earlier comments regarding the unique handling of tuition and fees in Massachusetts. She suggested that there may come a time when

the Board might decide not to approve tuition increases, even if set at zero, due to the limited extent of Board authority.

**BHE 25-40**

**ALTERNATIVE NON-RESIDENT UNDERGRADUATE TUITION RATES –  
BERKSHIRE COMMUNITY COLLEGE AND MASSACHUSETTS  
COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS FOR FISCAL YEAR 2026**

**VOTED**

The Board of Higher Education adopts the following alternative tuition rates and enrollment caps for new, non-resident, undergraduate students at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts and Berkshire Community College for Fiscal Year 2026:

**Alternative Non-Resident Undergraduate Tuition Rates**

	<b>Change</b>	<b>Rate Per Credit</b>
Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts	\$0	\$1,545
Berkshire Community College	\$0	\$39

**Enrollment Caps for New Students**

	<b># of Students</b>	<b>Change</b>
Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts	125	0
Berkshire Community College	40	19

**Authority  
Contact**

Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 15A, Section 9(i)  
Matt Cole, Deputy Commissioner for Administration, Finance, and  
Operations

**BHE 25-41**

**COMMUNITY COLLEGES NON-RESIDENT TUITION RATES FOR  
FISCAL YEAR 2026**

**VOTED**

The Board of Higher Education adopts the following non-resident tuition rates at the Community Colleges for Fiscal Year 2026:

	<b>Change</b>	<b>Rate Per Credit</b>	<b>Annual Non- Resident Tuition</b>
Berkshire Community College	\$0	\$260	\$7,800

Bristol Community College	\$0	\$230	\$6,900
Bunker Hill Community College	\$0	\$230	\$6,900
Cape Cod Community College	\$0	\$230	\$6,900
Greenfield Community College	\$0	\$281	\$8,430
Holyoke Community College	\$0	\$230	\$6,900
Massachusetts Bay Community College	\$0	\$230	\$6,900
Massasoit Community College	\$0	\$230	\$6,900
Middlesex Community College	\$0	\$230	\$6,900
Mount Wachusett Community College	\$0	\$230	\$6,900
North Shore Community College	\$0	\$257	\$7,710
Northern Essex Community College	\$0	\$266	\$7,980
Quinsigamond Community College	\$0	\$230	\$6,900
Roxbury Community College	\$0	\$247	\$7,410
Springfield Technical Community College	\$0	\$242	\$7,260

**Authority** Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 15A, Section 9(i)  
**Contact** Matt Cole, Deputy Commissioner for Administration, Finance, and Operations

**BHE 25-42                      COMMUNITY COLLEGES RESIDENT TUITION RATES FOR FISCAL YEAR 2026**

**VOTED**                      The Board of Higher Education adopts the following resident tuition rates at the community colleges for Fiscal Year 2026:

	Change	Rate Per Credit	Annual Non-Resident Tuition
Berkshire Community College	\$0	\$26	\$780
Bristol Community College	\$0	\$24	\$720
Bunker Hill Community College	\$0	\$24	\$720
Cape Cod Community College	\$0	\$24	\$720
Greenfield Community College	\$0	\$26	\$780
Holyoke Community College	\$0	\$24	\$720
Massachusetts Bay Community College	\$0	\$24	\$720
Massasoit Community College	\$0	\$24	\$720
Middlesex Community College	\$0	\$24	\$720

Mount Wachusett Community College	\$0	\$25	\$750
North Shore Community College	\$0	\$25	\$750
Northern Essex Community College	\$0	\$25	\$750
Quinsigamond Community College	\$0	\$24	\$720
Roxbury Community College	\$0	\$26	\$780
Springfield Technical Community College	\$0	\$25	\$750

**Authority**  
**Contact**

Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 15A, Section 9(i)  
Matt Cole, Deputy Commissioner for Administration, Finance, and Operations

**BHE 25-43**

**STATE UNIVERSITIES NON-RESIDENT GRADUATE TUITION FOR FISCAL YEAR 2026**

**VOTED**

The Board of Higher Education hereby adopts the following nonresident graduate tuition rates for state-supported programs at the State Universities for Fiscal Year 2026:

	Change	Annual Non-Resident Graduate Tuition
Bridgewater State University	\$0	\$7,050
Fitchburg State University	\$0	\$7,050
Framingham State University	\$0	\$7,050
Massachusetts College of Art and Design	N/A	N/A
Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts	\$0	\$9,975
Massachusetts Maritime Academy	N/A	N/A
Salem State University	\$0	\$7,050
Westfield State University	\$0	\$7,050
Worcester State University	\$0	\$7,050

**Authority**  
**Contact**

Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 15A, Section 9(i)  
Matt Cole, Deputy Commissioner for Administration, Finance, and Operations

**BHE 25-44****STATE UNIVERSITIES NON-RESIDENT UNDERGRADUATE TUITION FOR FISCAL YEAR 2026****VOTED**

The Board of Higher Education adopts the following non-resident undergraduate tuition rates at the State Universities for Fiscal Year 2026:

	Change	Annual Non-Resident Undergraduate Tuition
Bridgewater State University	\$0	\$7,050
Fitchburg State University	\$0	\$7,050
Framingham State University	\$0	\$7,050
Massachusetts College of Art and Design	N/A	N/A
Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts	\$0	\$9,975
Massachusetts Maritime Academy	N/A	N/A
Salem State University	\$0	\$7,050
Westfield State University	\$0	\$7,050
Worcester State University	\$0	\$7,050

**Authority**

Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 15A, Section 9(i)

**Contact**

Matt Cole, Deputy Commissioner for Administration, Finance, and Operations

**BHE 25-45****STATE UNIVERSITIES RESIDENT GRADUATE TUITION RATES FOR FISCAL YEAR 2026****VOTED**

The Board of Higher Education hereby adopts the following resident graduate tuition rates for state-supported programs at the State Universities for Fiscal Year 2026:

	Change	Annual Resident Graduate Tuition
Bridgewater State University	\$0	\$1,675

Fitchburg State University	\$0	\$1,675
Framingham State University	\$0	\$1,675
Massachusetts College of Art and Design	N/A	N/A
Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts	\$0	\$1,675
Massachusetts Maritime Academy	N/A	N/A
Salem State University	\$0	\$1,675
Westfield State University	\$0	\$1,675
Worcester State University	\$0	\$1,675

**Authority**

Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 15A, Section 9(i)

**Contact**

Matt Cole, Deputy Commissioner for Administration, Finance, and Operations

**BHE 25-46**

**STATE UNIVERSITIES RESIDENT UNDERGRADUATE TUITION RATES FOR FISCAL YEAR 2026**

**VOTED**

The Board of Higher Education adopts the following resident undergraduate tuition rates at the State Universities for Fiscal Year 2026:

	Change	Annual Resident Undergraduate Tuition
Bridgewater State University	\$0	\$910
Fitchburg State University	\$0	\$970
Framingham State University	\$0	\$970
Massachusetts College of Art and Design	N/A	N/A
Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts	\$0	\$1,030
Massachusetts Maritime Academy	N/A	N/A
Salem State University	\$0	\$910
Westfield State University	\$0	\$970
Worcester State University	\$0	\$970

**Authority**

Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 15A, Section 9(i)

**Contact**

Matt Cole, Deputy Commissioner for Administration, Finance, and Operations

## **VI. OTHER BUSINESS**

### Changing Federal Landscape

Chair Gabrieli introduced a new agenda item focused on the evolving federal landscape and its impact on the Board and institutions of higher education. He proposed making this subject a recurring discussion point at future Board meetings to facilitate updates and open dialogue among Board members.

In support of Chair Gabrieli's suggestion, Commissioner Ortega emphasized the importance of tracking the federal orders and actions that have been enacted so far this calendar year, noting that many initiatives are linked to equity commitments. He stated that Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou leads a working group of legal, communications, and policy staff at the Department who are focused on assessing federal developments and their implications for higher education.

Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou reported that the internal working group meets regularly to evaluate federal Executive Orders and agency actions that affect higher education and highlighted that there have been over 151 Executive Orders issued to date, which implicate a broad array of issues such as immigration, diversity, equity, and accreditation. Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou explained that while Executive Orders do not change existing laws, they do direct federal agencies' enforcement of the law and can prompt agencies to terminate federal grants or contracts that do not align with administration priorities. She stated that MA Attorney General's Office (AGO) has, to date, filed or joined in over a dozen lawsuits challenging these federal actions including, where appropriate, contract and grant terminations. Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou stated that the Department is serving in a coordinating and facilitating role. Working in partnership with the Executive Office of Education, she and her legal team serve as a liaison between the AGO and the public IHEs to help identify actionably harm and, as necessary, help pull together supporting documentation. Finally, to the extent our campuses are asking for interpretative guidance, we help identify issues and gaps and assist in developing and disseminating such guidance.

Deputy Commissioner Michael Dannenberg next provided updates on federal budget developments affecting higher education. He outlined three major federal items currently impacting higher education.

- **Fiscal Year 2025 Rescissions:** The current federal administration has already clawed back or stopped, according to the American Public Land Grant University Association, nearly \$2.5 billion stemming from grants and contracts awarded to Massachusetts colleges, primarily related to the National Institutes of Health grants. Congress has granted authority for further rescissions, which could lead to additional funding cuts.
- **Skinny Budget for FY26:** The President's proposed federal budget for 2026 includes significant cuts to five major student access programs: Federal Work-Study Program, SEOG Program, TRIO Programs, GEAR UP and Childcare Campus Program. Deputy Commissioner Dannenberg highlighted the importance of Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant (FSEOG) funding, which provides \$30 million annually to Massachusetts, and expressed concern over potential cuts to this and other programs.
- **Budget Reconciliation Process:** This process requires only a simple majority (51 votes) to pass significant reforms, such as increasing the minimum credit hours required for minimum and maximum Pell Grant eligibility, eliminating the in-school interest subsidy for Subsidized Stafford Loans, and making income-driven repayment options less favorable for student-borrowers.

Deputy Commissioner Dannenberg characterized the items as varying in urgency, with rescissions being a current concern, the skinny budget proposals presenting serious concerns, and the reconciliation proposals presenting the most significant potential impacts on students, borrowers, and institutions.

Commissioner Ortega emphasized the importance of monitoring federal developments and their potential impact on state priorities. He noted the need for the Board and Department to stay proactive in advocating for institutions and preparing for any changes that might arise from federal actions.

Chair Gabrieli thanked the Commissioner, noting that he believes he has demonstrated he has leaders on his team who are highly engaged in tracking what is going on. He indicated that he was encouraged to hear that we are not only "on top of it," but also coordinating and working closely with campus leadership and others to be able to respond quickly. He expressed confidence in the Board's preparedness to respond to changes, emphasizing the importance of constructive engagement with legislative and budgetary processes, even when those decisions may lie outside the Board's direct authority.



Board Member Allen expressed appreciation for the overview provided and brought to the Board's attention the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) letter, entitled "A Call for Constructive Engagement."<sup>1</sup> She shared the letter on her screen and stated that the document was issued on April 22<sup>nd</sup> and it is basically engaging public and private higher educational institutions from around the country to come together and speak with one, united voice to challenged perceived government overreach and political interference in higher education. Board member Chernow highlighted that many institutions in Massachusetts have already signed onto the letter, including over half of the Community Colleges and eight of the nine State Universities, along with several private colleges. She emphasized the importance of collective action to support academic freedom and the integrity of higher education and suggested that the Board should also sign on to this letter.

Chair Gabrieli acknowledged the significance of Vice Chair Chernow's proposal and shared his initial hesitations about the Board taking positions on current issues. However, he recognized the unique circumstances and the collaborative nature of the AAC&U document, noting that over 600 colleges nationwide have endorsed it. Chair Gabrieli suggested a motion for discussion, as follows:

The Board of Higher Education requests the Commissioner to assess the suitability, legal and otherwise, of joining the numerous Massachusetts and national higher education leaders in signing the American Association of Colleges and Universities joint statement entitled "A Call for Constructive Engagement." The Board instructs the Commissioner to either sign the letter, following appropriate legal review and coordination with state leaders, or bring back to the Board a suitable alternative.

Chair Gabrieli added that the motion aims to ensure coordination with state leaders while allowing the Board to take a unified stance on the issues facing higher education. He encouraged discussion among Board members on the proposed motion, inviting their thoughts and any concerns regarding signing on to the initiative.

- Board Member Allen expressed her support for signing the AAC&U letter, emphasizing the importance of addressing the relationship between state and federal jurisdictions in higher education. She noted that the letter promotes respectful collaboration and defends core principles.

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<sup>1</sup> [A Call for Constructive Engagement | AAC&U](#)

- Board Member Royal concurred and advocated for the Board to support the statement, while also suggesting the inclusion of dialogue and guest speakers at future meetings to reinforce the value of education and elevate the conversation around these issues.
- Board Member Mattera reflected on his initial hesitation about making a statement but ultimately recognized the importance of leadership in public higher education. He expressed support for the motion, emphasizing the need for a balanced and thoughtful statement.
- Student Member Nguyen thanked Vice Chair Chernow and Chair Gabrieli for bringing the proposal forward, asserting that the Bard's endorsement would provide encouragement and reassurance to students, particularly prospective ones.
- Board Member Christensen sought clarification on the motion's terminology regarding due diligence. Chair Gabrieli confirmed that the terminology involves assessing any legal implications while ensuring coordination with the Attorney General and the Governor's office.

Chair Gabrieli further clarified that the motion is intended to authorize the Commissioner to assess the suitability of signing the AAC&U letter, ensuring proper legal review and consultation with state leaders. He emphasized that while the Board supports the concept, it must also align with state authorities.

Hearing no further discussion, Chair Gabrieli called for a vote on the motion, which was carried by members present through a roll call vote, as follows:

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

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

## **VII. ADJOURNMENT**

The meeting was adjourned at 12:29 p.m.

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