

MASSACHUSETTS BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

June 17, 2025

10:00 a.m.

Via Zoom

Meeting Minutes (Special Meeting)

A special meeting of the Board of Higher Education (BHE or Board) was held on Tuesday, June 17, 2025, remotely via teleconference (Zoom).

The following Board Members were present:

Chris Gabrieli, Chair

Harneen Chernow, Vice Chair¹

Danielle Allen

Mary Burns

Ann Christensen

Alex Cortez

Patrick Tutwiler, Secretary of Education

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:

Veronica Conforme

Judy Pagliuca

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

I. CALL TO ORDER

Board Chair Chris Gabrieli called the special meeting of the Board to order at 10:09 a.m. Roll call attendance was taken (see above for attendance roster).

¹ Joined the meeting at 11:18 am.

Chair Gabrieli informed members that Vice Chair Harneen Chernow is balancing two meetings but plans to join for the voting phase and is eager to view the Commissioner's Spotlight recording afterwards.

II. COMMISSIONER'S SPOTLIGHT

a. [Early College](#)

Commissioner Ortega remarked that his "Commissioner's Spotlight" segment spotlight would cover an introduction to early college in Massachusetts, its guiding principles, current scope, and impact, followed by a discussion of successes and challenges faced by the Early College Joint Committee concerning alignment of the early college program with the Department of Higher Education's strategic priorities. Commissioner Ortega introduced Christine Williams, the Assistant Commissioner for Regulatory Affairs and Strategic Initiatives, noting that she would lead the presentation on early college programming in Massachusetts.

Assistant Commissioner Williams expressed gratitude to the Commissioner, Chair Gabrieli, and the Board, for their support of early college programming and acknowledged Mike Glick, a policy fellow, for his contributions to the Early College presentation. She described the Early College program as a collaboratively administered opportunity for Massachusetts high school students – particularly those facing barriers to higher education - to take college-level courses, enhance their educational experience, and broaden their career aspirations.

Assistant Commissioner Williams highlighted that in 2016, the Board commissioned a study that led to the establishment of the Early College Joint Committee, which developed criteria for program designation focused on equitable access, academic pathways, student support, career exploration, and partnerships between high schools and higher education. She highlighted the interdependent elements of the early college programs, including curriculum alignment and the provision of holistic support, which facilitate smoother transitions from high school to college and help students overcome barriers to postsecondary education. Assistant Commissioner Williams also noted current efforts to grow Early College programming in Massachusetts, such as engaging in strategic planning, updating designation criteria, developing evaluation plans, and managing the application process to ensure continued growth and effectiveness of the programs.

Assistant Commissioner Williams discussed Massachusetts' active role in the national Early College movement, noting the expansion of designated programs across all regions, with twenty-eight (28) higher education institutions collaborating with sixty-two (62) high schools. She further acknowledged the legislature's ongoing financial support, which has been crucial for the growth of early college initiatives, and recognized key advocates and partnerships that have facilitated funding distribution.

Assistant Commissioner Williams reported that participation in Early College programming has more than doubled since Fall 2021, particularly among underrepresented groups, with nearly 9,000 students currently enrolled. Data analysis indicated that early college participants outperform their peers in college enrollment rates, demonstrating a positive impact across various demographics. She added that early college graduates are more likely to remain in Massachusetts for their post-secondary education, with over 80% attending local institutions, particularly public colleges.

While noting that Early College students show higher persistence rates into their second year of post-secondary education, which is an important indicator of future degree attainment, Assistant Commissioner Williams mentioned that national studies suggest early college programs significantly enhance post-secondary degree attainment, indicating promising outcomes for Massachusetts students though specific graduation data is still being compiled.

Commissioner Ortega expressed strong optimism about the early college program, noting its growth in both high school and higher education participation, as well as promising outcomes in enrollment and persistence. He accentuated the importance of quantitative data in demonstrating the program's efficacy while also recognizing the value of qualitative insights. He then proceeded to introduce student Melanie Cerin Aldana, to share her experience on the program's impact from a student perspective.

Ms. Aldana introduced herself as a proud early college alum and current biotechnology major at Mass Bay Community College, who identifies as a first-generation, low-income student. She shared that despite her initial doubts about attending college due to financial constraints, early college transformed her outlook and aspirations. Ms. Aldana credited the program and its supporters with nurturing her confidence and ambition and emphasized that Early College not only opened doors for her but also equipped her to empower others, highlighting the program's role in fostering transformation and possibility for students. She concluded by expressing

gratitude for the Board's support, reinforcing that their investment in Early College is an investment in the future of students like her.

Commissioner Ortega expressed gratitude to Ms. Aldana for her impactful remarks. He emphasized the need to continue advocating for the Early College program while outlining the next steps for its strategic goals moving toward 2030, such as increasing enrollment to 2,000 high school students, with at least 70% from underrepresented groups.

Commissioner Ortega stressed the importance of maintaining program quality to achieve desired outcomes, including graduation rates and successful transitions to college. He pointed out that these goals align with the Board's priorities, which focus on innovation, equity, affordability, and student success. He stressed that the early college initiative aims to foster a college-going culture, especially for students who may not have previously considered higher education.

Looking ahead, Commissioner Ortega posed strategic questions regarding capacity building, credit transferability, instructional quality, innovative models, and funding to support sustained growth and improved outcomes. He concluded by reiterating the Board's responsibility to consider these factors as they work to enhance the Early College program.

Board Member Paul Mattera inquired as to whether the Early College program is limited to public education. In response, Assistant Commissioner Williams clarified that while K-12 partners must be public high schools, the higher education partners can be both public and private. She cited few private institutions such as Fisher College, Wentworth College, and Merrimack College as examples of private postsecondary partners in the Early College program.

Board Member Bill Walczak expressed his support for the program and referenced the important role it plays in urban high schools where students may lack opportunities to experience college. He praised the initiative for helping students make informed decisions about their futures and thanked the legislature and Governor for their support, expressing hoping for continued funding for expansion. Chair Gabrieli acknowledged the insights shared and commended the team's efforts, noting that the spotlight presentations provide valuable information and context about the program and its stakeholders.

III. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Chair Gabrieli stated that the Board had received two requests for public comment: Chessye Moseley from the Massachusetts Alliance for Early College; and Max Page, President of the Massachusetts Teachers Association.

Chessye Moseley thanked the Board for the opportunity to comment and praised their leadership in shaping higher education in Massachusetts. She stated that Massachusetts Alliance for Early College's mission is to expand access to quality early college programs, with an emphasis on partnerships with various stakeholders. Ms. Moseley acknowledged Massachusetts' growth into a national leader in early college, with 10,000 student-participants largely from underserved populations. She noted Early College's significant positive impact on student enrollment, persistence, and the development of essential skills. Ms. Moseley asked that DHE play a more substantial role in scaling the Early College initiative, and she identified three key areas for focus: instructional modalities, deep credit models, and sustainable funding. Moseley concluded her remarks by urging the Board to address barriers to growth and use Early College as a strategic pathway toward advancing equity and future workforce development.

Max Page, President of the MTA, shared his insights on the current challenges facing public higher education. He highlighted the potential dangers posed by the federal budget, which could significantly impact research capabilities and student financial aid, and shared an estimate that around 20,000 Massachusetts students might lose all federal aid and another 43,000 could face reductions due to federal budget cuts. He urged the Board to advocate for using funds from the Fair Share Amendment to mitigate the impact of these cuts, proposing a joint effort to secure \$200 million to support affordability and access in public higher education. Mr. Page also commended the collaborative efforts of the Commission on Higher Education Quality and Affordability (CHEQA) and its success in terms of reaching consensus on various issues. He emphasized the importance of maintaining a strong commitment to public education, especially during challenging times, and opined that a decline in public education is detrimental to democracy. Finally, Mr. Page celebrated the success of the Fair Share Amendment, which has exceeded expectations and will provide significant funding for initiatives such as free community college and investments in public education.

IV. ACCEPTANCE OF MINUTES

Chair Gabrieli requested a motion to approve minutes for the March 28, 2025, Board meeting. Board Member Alex Cortez noted that he was listed as both attending and not attending the meeting and asked for a technical amendment to note that he did not attend.

Subject to amending the minutes to note Board Member Cortez's attendance, Chair Gabrieli called for a vote. On a motion duly made and seconded, March 28th BHE meeting minutes were approved unanimously by all Board Members present through a roll call vote, as follows:

- Chris Gabrieli, Chair – Yes
- Danielle Allen – Yes
- Mary Burns – Yes
- Ann Christensen – Yes
- Alex Cortez – Yes
- Paul Mattera – Yes
- Secretary Patrick Tutwiler – Yes
- Niki Nguyen – Yes
- Christina Royal – Yes
- Bill Walczak – Yes

V. REMARKS

A. Board of Higher Education Chair

Chair Gabrieli thanked the Commissioner and his team for the Early College spotlight presentation. He commended the collaboration between public high schools and higher education institutions and referenced data showing that Early College students are more likely to persist toward college completion compared to their peers, noting the significant benefits for students who may not have been seen as college ready.

Acknowledging the emotional impact of Melanie's presentation, Chair Gabrieli reflected on the importance of belonging and the role of educators in fostering student confidence. Referencing Massachusetts's relatively low ranking in dual enrollment participation among peer states, he stressed that Early College is in a critical moment at which it should be grown into a "widespread practice" rather than a boutique program.

Chair Gabrieli then took a moment to acknowledge outgoing Board Member Paul Mattera, highlighting his contributions and dedication to the Board as he approaches his last meeting. He

expressed appreciation for Board Member Mattera's governance and his commitment to board governance and the mission of public education.

B. Secretary of Education

Secretary of Education Patrick Tutwiler thanked Commissioner Ortega, Assistant Commissioner Christine Williams, and Ms. Aldana for their insightful discussion of Early College. He expressed his own staunch support for Early College, sharing his own positive experiences as a high school student and as a former superintendent in Lynn, MA, where he oversaw a significant early college program. He acknowledged the challenges faced in the current academic year but commended students, faculty, and leadership for their perseverance and achievements.

Secretary Tutwiler highlighted the importance of high school graduation requirements and the role of higher education in shaping what students should know and be able to do upon graduation. He stated that the Governor's Office has established a High School Graduation Council that aims to both define what it means to earn a diploma in Massachusetts and ensure high standards for all students. Secretary Tutwiler also encouraged participation in a survey developed by the Council to gather perspectives on graduation requirements. Secretary Tutwiler concluded his remarks by celebrating Board Member Mattera's contributions to the Board and expressing his well wishes.

C. Presidents

[State University Segmental Report](#)

Chair Gabrieli next introduced Nancy Niemi, President of Framingham State University, to speak to the Board on behalf of the State University segment in light of President Thompson's absence. President Niemi welcomed North Shore Community College President Bill Heineman, the newly appointed Chair of the Community College Council of Presidents. She emphasized the importance of collaboration between the Community College and State University segments in addressing the challenges facing post-secondary education. She recognized Board Member Mattera for his distinguished service on the Board and the Salem State Board of Trustees and assured the Board that, despite his departure, Board Member Mattera's commitment to public service and education would continue.

President Niemi also welcomed Dr. Lisa Battaglini as the new State University Segmental representative on the Board of Higher Education, expressing excitement about her extensive experience in the system. She noted that during their recent, annual end-of-year retreat, the State University presidents discussed various initiatives, including a co-op pilot program designed to integrate classroom learning with work experience; she thanked Chair Gabrieli for

joining them to help advance that work, and also noted that they welcomed Commissioner Ortega to their retreat as well, and appreciated his attendance. She added that they testified remotely from their retreat for the Bright Act on the legislative hearing held on June 3rd. She concluded by thanking the Board and the Department for their support and collaboration.

[Community College Segmental Report](#)

President Heineman reported a significant enrollment increase across the Community College segment, including a 40% enrollment increase at North Shore Community College for Fall 2025, and attributed this growth to Free Community College initiatives such as Mass Reconnect and Mass Educate. President Heineman expressed concerns about potential federal policy changes that could undermine these gains, such as the House's reconciliation bill, which proposes cuts to Pell Grants and other financial aid programs. He accentuated the importance of preserving Pell Grants for students taking fewer credits, noting that changes could jeopardize Free Community College initiatives. On a positive note, he mentioned the inclusion of "Workforce Pell" in the federal reconciliation bill, which would expand financial aid eligibility for non-credit workforce training programs. However, President Heineman cautioned about the risk of unaccredited institutions exploiting this new policy and stressed the need for state oversight to protect students.

President Heineman expressed optimism for the release of the Fiscal Year 2026 budget and advocated for timely allocation of funds to support Community Colleges, particularly for programs addressing student needs, such as mental health and hunger. He concluded by expressing a desire for ongoing dialogue regarding the creation of innovative programs and urged that diverse perspectives should continue to be included in the decision-making process.

Chair Gabrieli next introduced UMass Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs, Student Affairs, and Equity Dr. Nefertiti (Nef) Walker, who was in attendance on behalf of President Martin Meehan and the University of Massachusetts (UMass) President's Office, to share remarks on the topic of Early College.

Dr. Walker spoke to the pilot early college program that UMass launched at its Lowell and Dartmouth campuses back in 2022, which was initially funded by a \$330,000 grant and later supported with \$940,000 in state funding. Dr. Walker stated that UMass Amherst has since joined the Early College Initiative by partnering with five high schools, bringing the total number of Early College students served by the UMass system to 1,100.

Dr. Walker shared President Meehan's goal to triple early college participation (which has been rebranded from the "Commonwealth Collegiate Academy" to "UMass Early College" for clarity) within five years, emphasizing the program's scalability and the high quality of courses offered by UMass faculty. She reported strong success rates, with over 90% of early college participants achieving success, and noted that these students persist at rates up to 20% higher than their peers, adding that the program has saved students an estimated \$7.5 million.

Dr. Walker emphasized the need for both collaboration across public higher education sectors and sustainable state investments, as UMass's programs cost over \$1.3 million annually. She called for flexibility in program delivery and streamlined designation processes to enhance access, particularly for underserved communities. She concluded her remarks by acknowledging the Governor's support and the commitment of state partners in advancing early college initiatives.

Chair Gabrieli thanked Dr. Walker for her insights and expressed enthusiasm for her leadership at UMass. He acknowledged the collaborative efforts across different educational segments and noted the unique approaches each institution is taking to enhance early college opportunities. He highlighted President Heineman's success in partnering with Lynn Public Schools to establish a dedicated school on campus, underscoring the innovative practices emerging from various institutions. Chair Gabrieli recognized the importance of reaching rural areas, where access to higher education can be more challenging, and expressed excitement about the collective commitment to serving students across the Commonwealth.

D. Student Report

Next, Board Student Advisory Council (SAC) Chair and Student Voting Member Niki Nguyen addressed the conclusion of her term with the Board. She reflected on her journey through the Adult Automotive Technology Program at Weymouth High School and commented on the transformative nature of public higher education. Student Member Nguyen highlighted ongoing concerns regarding reductions in critical programs such as TRIO and Jumpstart, which provide essential mentorship and professional training, particularly for first-generation and low-income students. She stressed that these programs are vital for translating academic achievements into career opportunities and called for the protection and expansion of holistic student support.

Student Member Nguyen urged educational leaders to actively support diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, especially as federal policy shifts on this subject. She emphasized the

importance of transparency and commitment to safety and educational justice as students return for the new academic year. Student Member Nguyen also reported on SAC's efforts to promote Open Educational Resources (OER) and the need for support in faculty adoption and student awareness. She noted that affordability extends beyond tuition to include costs like textbooks and transportation.

Student Member Nguyen then introduced SAC's recent nominees for the Board's student voting members, Thalles DeSouza and Hannah Rosencrantz. Student Member Nguyen expressed confidence in their leadership for the upcoming year, and concluded her remarks by thanking the Board, staff, and fellow SAC members for their support.

Chair Gabrieli welcomed the nominees and praised Student Member Nguyen for her impressive leadership and participation throughout her term. He specifically noted her impactful testimony regarding mental health support for students.

Board Member Walczak commended Student Member Nguyen for her representation of Massachusetts students and her positive contributions to Massachusetts higher education. Vice Chair Chernow echoed these sentiments, praising Student Member Nguyen for consistently bringing student voices to the Board during challenging times in higher education while expressing excitement for her future endeavors.

E. Commissioner

- Changing Federal Landscape – Updates

Commissioner Ortega continued the meeting by expressing gratitude as the academic year ends and acknowledging the meeting's emotional sentiment. He thanked Board Member Mattera for his service, and he also acknowledged President Pedraja for his service this past year as the chair for the Community College Council of Presidents. He referenced the last Board meeting during which members asked the Department to sign on to the "call for constructive engagement" letter being circulated by the American Association of Colleges and Universities and confirmed that he did sign on to the letter as requested.

He then invited Chief Legal Counsel Dena Papanikolaou and Deputy Commissioner Michael Dannenberg to provide updates and insights on recent federal developments impacting higher

education, noting their pivotal roles in responding to or otherwise keeping the Department and Board informed about ongoing changes and challenges at the federal level.

Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou focused her comments on work that her legal team is engaged in with the Massachusetts Attorney General's Office (AGO) and the campuses in response to the several executive orders and agency actions that have been issued by the federal administration since January. By way of background, she noted that when an executive order is issued or when a federal agency action is taken- such as a contract or grant termination- the Department's role primarily has been to help assess the situation, in coordination and in close consultation with legal counsel at the campus level, and help identify whether there is actionable harm that may warrant the filing of possible litigation. She then provided three examples:

- *State of New York vs. McMahon*- On March 13, 2025, the MA AGO joined with 20 other states to challenge the Trump Administration's dismantling of the US Department of Education. A motion for a preliminary injunction was sought and granted. Of note, Commissioner Ortega filed a declaration, prepared by the Department's legal team, in support of the preliminary injunction; the Commissioner's declaration was cited by the court in granting the injunction.
- On May 28, 2025, the MA AGO joined 15 other states in filing a complaint and seeking injunctive relief to block cuts to National Science Foundation (NSF) grants, which have been terminated due to "shifting federal administrative priorities." These grants are crucial for increasing STEM participation among underrepresented populations.
- *Massachusetts v. Kennedy*- On April 4, 2025, in a lawsuit co-led by the MA AGO, 16 states filed action challenging the federal government's termination of National Institutes of Health (NIH) grants. The biomedical grants at issue focus on important topics such as racial disparities and health equity, research-based gender identity, and vaccines. Just yesterday, a First Circuit judge issued a strongly worded opinion ruling in favor of the plaintiffs. He called the federal directives to "exclude and ban or blacklist" certain topics, including DEI and health of sexual and gender minorities "illegal and void," "bereft of any reasoning," and he noted that he had "never seen government racial discrimination like he had found in the administrative record." Of note, the MA AGO has credited the declarations prepared by the University of Massachusetts for the win in this underlying matter.

On federal budgetary issues, Deputy Commissioner Dannenberg provided an update on recent federal policy developments affecting higher education funding. He began by explaining that

the House GOP reconciliation proposal could result in the loss of Pell Grant aid to approximately 45,000 Massachusetts residents, totaling nearly \$60 million in lost aid. Additionally, significant changes to student loans could lead to a 29% increase in interest rates for subsidized Stafford loans, which would affect 270,000 borrowers in Massachusetts. Deputy Commissioner Dannenberg also mentioned that the Trump administration's recent budget proposal includes further cuts to the Pell Grant program, potentially impacting 70,000 students in Massachusetts while costing the Commonwealth's public colleges and universities around \$110 million.

Deputy Commissioner Dannenberg then reported that the chair of the Senate Education Committee has rejected the House's proposed Pell Grant cuts. However, the Senate chair has accepted the cuts to student loans, indicating higher repayment costs for current and future borrowers. Deputy Commissioner Dannenberg noted a recent reconciliation proposal from the Senate Tax Committee that suggests a reduced increase in the federal endowment tax compared to the House's proposal, which had a dramatic increase.

Finally, Deputy Commissioner Dannenberg emphasized the likelihood of significant cuts to student loans, the potential avoidance of Pell Grant reductions, and an increase in the federal endowment tax for wealthier institutions. He concluded by noting the fast-moving nature of these developments and that there continues to be new proposals and new actions happening in Washington. He and other Department staff will continue to track the proposals and their implications for Massachusetts students and higher education funding.

Commissioner Ortega thanked Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou and Deputy Commissioner Dannenberg for their updates and emphasized the importance of being proactive amid the ongoing changes affecting higher education. He highlighted the implications for affordability, student success, and the financial viability of institutions. Board Member Walczak pointed out the broader implications of potential Medicaid cuts, which could significantly impact the state budget and, subsequently, education funding.

Vice Chair Chernow raised concerns about the use of Pell Grants for short-term certificates, warning of potential exploitation by bad actors. In response, Commissioner Ortega reiterated the Department's prioritization of consumer protection and indicated that the Department would keep the Board informed in this regard. Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou added that the Board currently requires approval for short-term programs of thirty (30) credits or more and indicated that the Department may adjust thresholds as needed to protect consumers amid the

shifting federal context. Deputy Commissioner Dannenberg agreed with the importance of consumer protection. He explained that there are two different accountability proposals regarding student loans: one from the House that includes a risk-sharing fee for colleges, and another from the Senate that would restrict federal financial aid for programs not meeting gainful employment standards.

Chair Gabrieli emphasized the Board's commitment to staying informed about these developments, acknowledging the importance of preparation as federal and state budgets align.

VI. BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION MOTIONS

List of documents used:

[BHE 25-47](#): [BHE 25-48](#): [BHE 25-49](#): [BHE 25-50](#): [BHE 25-51](#) BHE 25-51

Chair Gabrieli introduced the following four, related motions, which he grouped together for Board discussion: BHE 25-47, *Renewal of Membership in the Commonwealth Honors Program for Framingham State University*; BHE 25-48, *Renewal of Membership in the Commonwealth Honors Program for Massasoit Community College*; BHE 25-49; *Renewal of Membership in the Commonwealth Honors Program for North Shore Community College* and BHE 25-50, *Renewal of Membership in the Commonwealth Honors Program for Salem State University*. All of the motions pertained to the re-approval of existing honors programs at Framingham State University, Massasoit Community College, North Shore Community College, and Salem State University.

Chair Gabrieli noted that Deputy Commissioner for Academic Affairs and Student Success Richard Riccardi and staff from the colleges and universities were present to address any questions. Chair Gabrieli emphasized the thorough review process these programs undergo to meet the Commonwealth honors program standards. Program Director for Academic Affairs and Student Success Keith Connors acknowledged the institutions' arduous work toward maintaining high standards and the rigorous peer review process involved.

Chair Gabrieli then called for a motion to bundle for approval and approve motions BHE 25-47, BHE 25-48, BHE 25-49, and BHE 25-50 for all four programs. Board Member Cortez moved the motion, and it was seconded by Member Paul Mattera.

Hearing no further discussion, Chair Gabrieli called for a vote. Motions BHE 25-47, BHE 25-48, BHE 25-49, and BHE 25-50 were approved unanimously by Board Members present through a roll call vote, as follows:

- Chris Gabrieli, Chair – Yes
- Mary Burns – Yes
- Harneen Chernow, Vice Chair – Yes
- Ann Christensen – Yes
- Alex Cortez – Yes
- Paul Mattera – Yes
- Secretary Patrick Tutwiler – Yes
- Niki Nguyen – Yes
- Christina Royal – Yes
- Bill Walczak – Yes

BHE 25-47 RENEWAL OF MEMBERSHIP IN THE COMMONWEALTH HONORS PROGRAM FOR FRAMINGHAM STATE UNIVERSITY

VOTED	The Board of Higher Education accepts the report of the
BHE 25-48	RENEWAL OF MEMBERSHIP IN THE COMMONWEALTH HONORS
BHE 25-49	RENEWAL OF MEMBERSHIP IN THE COMMONWEALTH HONORS
VOTED	PROGRAM FOR NORTH SHORE COMMUNITY COLLEGE
Authority	Commonwealth Honors Program for seven years, effective June 17, 2025. The Board of Higher Education accepts the report of the Commonwealth Honors Program Approval Process Guidelines as Commonwealth Honors Program for seven years, effective June 17, 2025.
Contact Authority	Richard Riccardi, Deputy Commissioner for Academic Affairs and Student Success
Authority	Revised by the Board of Higher Education in March 2022; G.L. c. 15A, § 9 Revised by the Board of Higher Education in March 2022; G.L. c. 15A, § 9 Keith M. Connors, Program Director for Academic Affairs and Student Success
Contact	Richard Riccardi, Deputy Commissioner for Academic Affairs and Student Success
Contact	Richard Riccardi, Deputy Commissioner for Academic Affairs and Student Success
	Keith M. Connors, Program Director for Academic Affairs and Student Success
	Keith M. Connors, Program Director for Academic Affairs and Student Success

Success

**BHE 25-50 RENEWAL OF MEMBERSHIP IN THE COMMONWEALTH HONORS
PROGRAM FOR SALEM STATE UNIVERSITY**

Chair

VOTED The Board of Higher Education accepts the report of the Commonwealth Honors Council Executive Committee and renews the membership of Salem State University in the Commonwealth Honors Program for seven years, effective June 17, 2025.

Authority Commonwealth Honors Program Approval Process Guidelines as Revised by the Board of Higher Education in March 2022; G.L. c. 15A, § 9.

Contact Richard Riccardi, Deputy Commissioner for Academic Affairs and Student Success

Keith M. Connors, Program Director for Academic Affairs and Student Success

Gabrieli next introduced BHE 25-51, *Delegation of Summer Authority to the Commissioner*, and noted that this is a standard motion passed annually. He stressed that this authority is not taken lightly and is necessary due to the lack of regularly scheduled Board meetings during the summer months. He added that the motion requires the Commissioner to seek input from the Board Chair and reassured the Board that past actions taken under this authority have been straightforward and have always been reported at the first Board meeting of the Fall semester. He indicated the possibility of holding a special Board meeting if significant issues arise during the summer, especially given the feasibility of virtual meetings.

Hearing no further discussion, Chair Gabrieli called for a vote. On a motion duly made and seconded, BHE 25-51 was approved unanimously by all Board members present through a roll call vote, as follows:

- Chris Gabrieli, Chair – Yes
- Mary Burns – Yes
- Harneen Chernow, Vice Chair – Yes
- Ann Christensen – Yes
- Alex Cortez – Yes
- Paul Mattera – Yes
- Secretary Patrick Tutwiler – Yes

- Niki Nguyen – Yes
- Christina Royal – Yes
- Bill Walczak – Yes

BHE 25-51 DELEGATION OF SUMMER AUTHORITY TO THE COMMISSIONER

VOTED	The Board of Higher Education (Board) delegates to the Commissioner, ex officio, until the next regularly scheduled meeting of the Board its authority to take such action, in consultation with and upon the advice of the Chair or Vice Chair of the Board, as is deemed necessary or desirable. The Commissioner shall report back to the Board on his exercise of this delegated authority.

Authority Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 15A, Section 6

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Contact Constantia T. Papanikolaou, Chief Legal Counsel

VII. OTHER BUSINESS

List of Documents Used:

PowerPoint Presentation-Innovation Pilot Proposals: Reduced Credit Degrees and BHE Degree Granting Authority- Update and Next Steps.

- a. Innovation Pilot Proposals: Reduced Credit Degrees and BHE Degree Granting Authority- Update and Discussion
[Full Report Here](#)

Chair Gabrieli introduced the final agenda item, which was an update on the Department's work in preparing a regulatory and policy structure by which the Board could receive and consider an innovative proposal on a broad range of things that may conflict with BHE regulations or standards, including a proposal for a degree for less than 120 credits. Commissioner Ortega provided brief context and invited Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou to provide an update.

Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou provided an overview of work done to date and next steps, starting with a timeline summary of BHE discussions held to date. She emphasized the purpose

of their present discussion was not to vote on draft regulations, but rather to facilitate a continued dialogue and present a summary of the preliminary regulatory and policy framework under development. Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou also introduced key staff members, including Deputy Commissioner Riccardi and Associate Commissioner Cindy Brown, who were present to address questions.

Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou explained that the regulations under development aim to strike an appropriate balance by enhancing the Board's ability to support innovation while ensuring program quality and consumer protection. She stated that the current thinking is that the framework would include one set of regulations that applies to both public and private institutions. She summarized the current, draft regulatory framework's three major sections that would allow the Board to "consider, advance, and evaluate" pilot proposals that may be inconsistent with specific regulatory requirements:

- Application and Review Process: Eligible institutions must demonstrate alignment with existing standards and identify any inconsistent regulations.
- Eligibility and Review Criteria: The Board will assess whether the proposed innovation outweighs the risks of modifying standards and ensure that the proposal maintains quality and consumer protection.
- Evaluation of the Pilot: Approval will be conditional and time-limited, with options for extending or phasing out based on the pilot's success.

Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou emphasized that a "sub-120 baccalaureate degree" regulation was not under development- but rather it is a high -level, broad innovation regulation that parallels the procedure in place with NECHE. Consistent with what was presented in prior Board meetings she confirmed that the draft regulations contemplate that an approved pilot would be conditional and time-limited, and the regulatory framework would also specify what happens at the end of the pilot (how the pilot is concluded), after the Board determines whether the pilot is successful or not. Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou also reviewed a list of examples of potential content that the Board should expect to see in the regulations (slide 6). She

concluded her remarks by outlining the timeline for sharing a preliminary draft with Board members and stakeholders, and soliciting feedback, and noted that the current plan was to bring the regulations back for a vote later in the Summer or early Fall 2025.

Chair Gabrieli expressed gratitude to Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou and the team for their efforts in developing the proposed regulatory and policy framework. He acknowledged that the Board had several informative sessions about this initiative and emphasized the importance of having a consistent approach to considering innovation proposals for both public and private institutions. He noted that the goal of distributing the draft regulations to Board members for review was to allow them time to reflect, ask questions, and provide input.

Chair Gabrieli highlighted the importance of engaging stakeholders and welcomed ongoing feedback from stakeholders, including the public college segments. He stressed that the regulations would enable institutions to propose innovations, including the discussed 90-credit degree, while ensuring that the Board maintains reputable standards for student protection and due process. He assured attendees that the Board's vote this summer/ fall would be for the approval of the Board to send draft regulations for public comment rather than for the adoption of final regulations.

Board Member Mattera asked about the procedural steps for the proposed regulations. He inquired if, after approval for publication and a public comment period, the Board would then decide whether to adopt the regulations. He also sought clarification on whether the Department is authorized to accept applications for innovative proposals or if those would always come to the Board. Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou confirmed that under the proposed regulatory framework all proposals would be brought to the Board for approval.

Chair Gabrieli concurred with Board Member Mattera, emphasizing that while the Department's technical expertise is crucial, many decisions will involve value-based considerations. He highlighted the need for public discussions about the implications of approving pilot programs. Commissioner Ortega reinforced the point that the mechanisms for accepting proposals do not equate to approval of such proposals, underscoring the Board's role in the final decision-making process.

Chair Gabrieli concluded the meeting by emphasizing the importance of receiving public comment as part of the promulgation process, as it ensures that stakeholder feedback is seriously considered. He further referenced previous successful regulations that underwent a thorough vetting process to enhance their language and effectiveness.

VIII. ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 12:43 p.m.

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