



State Universities  
of Massachusetts

## **CoP Remarks on Behalf of the State University System to the Board of Higher Education**

**May 19, 2026**

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Good morning, Chairman Gabrieli, Secretary Zrike, Commissioner Ortega, and members of the Board of Higher Education. On behalf of Chair Linda Thompson and the State Universities Council of Presidents, I want to thank you for the opportunity to provide an update on the Massachusetts State University System.

Chair Thompson is unable to attend today's meeting as she is traveling to China to deliver presentations at two universities focused on global public health, climate change, and healthcare innovation. As this is the final State Universities Segmental Report of the year, I would like to extend my sincere thanks to President Thompson for her outstanding leadership over the past two years as Chair of the Council of Presidents. Beginning in June, I will have the privilege of taking over as Chair of the CoP for the next two years. I look forward to working with all of you to advance public higher education across the Commonwealth and strengthen our state universities. I also look forward to continuing our partnership with President Heineman, who will remain Chair of the Community College Council of Presidents for another year.

### **Graduations and Celebrations**

It is a special time of year across our campuses, as we come together to celebrate the achievements of our students. Collectively, our state universities will graduate nearly 9,000 undergraduate and graduate students this year. But this is more than just an impressive number. This is about the talent, the creativity, and the leadership that each of these students—educated by our public colleges and universities—will contribute to communities in the Commonwealth and beyond. I want to extend my heartfelt congratulations to all of our graduates on this remarkable accomplishment and look forward to the many contributions they will make in the years ahead.

Our commencement ceremonies also provide an opportunity to recognize leaders whose work has made, and continues to make, a meaningful impact on our communities.

At MassArt, distinguished scholar, author, and founder of the civic initiative Vision & Justice Dr. Sarah Lewis will deliver the commencement address. We will award acclaimed photographer and MassArt faculty emeritus Abelardo Morell and musician Peter Wolf with honorary degrees. Urban planner, educator, and civic leader Dr. Ted Landsmark will receive the Morton R. Godine

Medal for Service to the Community. The award was established in 1989 in memory of a former MassArt Vice President and Trustee to honor individuals whose commitment to the community reflects the MassArt mission.

The collection of commencement speakers and honorees at our other state colleges and universities is equally impressive. Here are just a few examples:

Former Governor Charlie Baker and Attorney General Andrea Campbell served as keynote speakers at Bridgewater State University.

Lieutenant Governor Kim Driscoll, a proud Massachusetts public university graduate and parent to two state university graduates, delivered the keynote address at Fitchburg State University.

Massachusetts Maritime Academy will honor Marisol A. Chalas, a 1996 graduate of the Academy and the first Latina National Guard Black Hawk helicopter pilot. Colonel Chalas is also the first woman of Dominican heritage to achieve the rank of Colonel in the Army Reserve.

In addition to celebrating our graduates, we continue to honor the enduring mission of our institutions to prepare outstanding educators for the Commonwealth. At the end of April, we held our annual State University Educator Alumni Awards ceremony at the State House, recognizing graduates from all nine campuses who have made a lasting impact in Massachusetts public schools. While our universities have greatly expanded their academic offerings over the years, we remain deeply proud of our historic commitment to teacher preparation. Commissioner Ortega, we are grateful to you for once again providing motivation remarks at this year's event.

## **Transitions**

During the first week of June, the Council of Presidents will hold its annual business meeting at Massachusetts Maritime Academy. During this gathering, we will celebrate and bid farewell to our dear friend and colleague, President James "Jamie" Birge, as he begins his well-deserved retirement. President Birge became MCLA's 12th president in 2016, succeeding me as the institution's 11th president. Over the course of his distinguished tenure, President Birge led the college through the unprecedented challenges of the global COVID-19 pandemic, while also serving as Chair of the Council of Presidents. Under his leadership, MCLA doubled its reserve fund to more than \$26 million and significantly expanded diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives across the institution.

During President Birge's 10 years of service, MCLA earned recognition as a top-10 national public liberal arts institution and as a national leader in social mobility. His steady leadership, dedication to students, and commitment to institutional excellence have left a lasting impact on the college.

President Birge, you will be deeply missed. We wish you every happiness in retirement when you will have more time for fly fishing and creating cherished memories with your two beloved granddaughters.

As we say goodbye to President Birge, we are also pleased to welcome Dr. Diana L.

Rogers-Adkinson who is on today's agenda to be approved as the next president of MCLA. Dr. Rogers-Adkinson currently serves as Senior Vice Chancellor for Academic and Student Affairs and Chief Academic Officer for the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education, where she provides system-level leadership for 10 universities serving approximately 80,000 students. She holds a Ph.D. from Kent State University and brings a distinguished record of academic leadership, fiscal stewardship, and a deep commitment to equity and access in public higher education. My colleagues and I look forward to collaborating with Dr. Rogers-Adkinson when she begins her role in July.

## **Conclusion**

While the Senate is debating its version of the FY27 state budget this week, my colleagues and I would like to express our sincere thanks to the Legislature for their continued efforts to invest in public higher education. We would also like to thank this Board, EOE and the Department for your continued advocacy efforts to ensure that our campuses remain affordable and accessible to the students that we serve. My colleagues and I are grateful that Massachusetts students attending public higher education institutions are receiving more state financial aid than ever before, that funding our collective bargaining agreements is prioritized, and our student retention and graduation rates are improving with continued funding of SUCCESS grants. Finally, we thank the dedicated staff of the Department of Higher Education and the Executive Office for your continued partnership, responsiveness, and support of our campuses.

Lastly, I would like to thank you all for being here with us at MassArt. It is so important that we have the opportunity to be together in person to share the great work happening across our campuses and to collaborate with colleagues and partners across higher education, government and beyond. I hope we will be able to continue to do so in the future. Thank you for the work that you do on behalf of all of our students and our institutions.