



State Universities
of Massachusetts

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

March 19, 2024

Introduction:

Good Morning, Chairman Gabrieli, Secretary Tutwiler, Commissioner Ortega and members of the Board of Higher Education. On behalf of the State Universities Council of Presidents, thank you for this opportunity to provide you with an update on the Massachusetts State University System.

First and foremost, I would like to thank the Department of Higher Education for their presentation. Taking any of the complexities out of the financial aid process for our students and our staff is greatly appreciated.

I would also like to congratulate President Vanden Hooven and the Community College System on their successes with the MassReconnect Program. This success is also our success, as many of these students go on to our state universities.

It is hard to believe that the end of this academic year is fast approaching. Many of our students are returning from spring break after taking advantage of unique opportunities offered by our campuses through alternative spring break programs.

At Salem State University, we offered a variety of alternative spring break opportunities this year. I am pleased to report that the Frederick E. Berry Institute of Politics offered its second annual alternative spring break at the State House where students stayed in Boston and met with members of the legislature, lobbyists, and advocates to learn about the Massachusetts legislative process and the pressing issues facing the Commonwealth. We also had students working with Habitat for Humanity in Houston last week and had about 75 students traveling on five international trips to six different countries. These opportunities are often the first time our students leave the Commonwealth, and many were made possible through public and private funds that allow all of our students the same chance to participate.

Many of our campuses provide these unique experiential learning opportunities to students. Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts and Design (MCLA) similarly offered a variety of spring break travel courses to allow students the option to experience the rich culture and history of Ireland, explore the tropical ecology of the Bahamas, and focus on state-of-the-art science and cultural exploration in South Africa. MCLA offered students the option to take a bus tour of the American South to celebrate and commemorate the major milestones and events of the Civil Rights Era. Since 95 percent of the total cost of these trips was donor-funded, all students, regardless of their economic status, had the opportunity to participate in these meaningful experiences.

As you know, many of our students are paying their own way through college and are working one, two or sometimes three jobs to make their dream a reality. Financially supported alternative spring break trips provide our students with life-changing experiences for growth, professional development, and civic engagement that they would otherwise not experience due to cost. We strongly believe that these types of opportunities are important for any college student, and our state university students should be no exception.

FY25 Budget

I would now like to turn your attention to the FY25 budget. A few weeks ago, I testified on behalf of the Council of Presidents at the Joint Ways and Means Committee hearing at Greenfield Community College regarding the Healey-Driscoll budget. While I expressed the Council of Presidents' gratitude for the recent investments in public higher education, as I have done here before, I reinforced the fact that there is still more work to be done. More investment in our students and campus infrastructures is needed for both the personal growth of our students and for the continued economic growth of the Commonwealth and the regions we serve.

In addition to supporting the priorities included in H.2, the Council of Presidents asked the legislature to continue their investment in making public higher education more accessible to Massachusetts residents by increasing affordability further up the income ladder to lower and middle-class families. The CoP supports the Department of Higher Education's system-wide approach to the MassGrant Plus Expansion. Since we believe we must build a system that offers choice to Massachusetts' socioeconomically challenged students, we encouraged the legislature to increase the investment in the MassGrant Plus program by an additional \$75 million.

MassGrant Plus currently offers all students whose families earn under \$72,000 a year free tuition and fees at any of our public higher education institutions. Adding an additional \$75 million to this program would make college free for all students attending any two or four-year public higher education institution, whose family income is under \$110,000 annually. Making this investment is consistent with the accessibility goals of the DHE's Strategic Plan for Racial Equity and addresses affordability in an efficient way. The Council of Presidents asks that you

endorse this effort and join us in our request that an additional \$75 million be added to the MassGrant Plus program.

We also requested that the legislature extend the SUCCESS program to four-year institutions. The state universities serve the same students as our community colleges and extending the SUCCESS programs to the state's public four-year institutions will help to improve the outcomes and persistence rates of these students while meeting the workforce needs of the Commonwealth. Extending SUCCESS to our four-year institutions will give us much needed resources to support students through this proven program.

We further requested the legislature continue to support the State Universities Performance Funding line item. The Governor recommended a reduction in this important line item, and we requested recapitalization at \$11.3 million.

Additionally, we asked that the legislature support continued investments in:

- The State Universities Internship Incentive program
- Funding for comprehensive student behavioral and mental health programs, and
- Support of early college and innovation pathways programs. In fact, I will be up at the State House this Thursday to testify about Early College.

I have continually stressed in my past remarks, both to the BHE and to the Joint Committee on Ways and Means on March 1st, the need to change the way the state funds capital construction and deferred maintenance projects on public higher education campuses. The current practice for funding most public higher education capital projects shifts a significant financial burden of these project costs on to our students. Currently, at Salem State University, approximately \$3,000 of our \$11,000 in-state tuition and fees goes towards capital fees for projects already completed on our campus. With the increasing costs of SSU BOLD, a much needed project on our campus, we risk an increase to this fee without additional state support. As we strive to make higher education more accessible and affordable to all, we must consider the impact these capital projects have on our students and find ways to provide them with the modern, academic spaces they deserve without over burdening current and future students with the expense of construction.

The Governor's budget recommendations include \$125 million of Fair Share funding to address capital needs across the higher education system. Although \$125 million is only a fraction of what is needed to begin addressing the condition of our aging campus infrastructure, the administration intends to use this funding to leverage capital construction and deferred maintenance bond funds. The last time the state made any major capital investment on public higher education campuses was in 2008 through a \$1 billion Public Higher Education Bond Bill, which I proudly voted for.

Today, campus infrastructure and facilities needs are so great (in the billions) that a capital or special obligation bond is the only way for the state to meaningfully address the condition of the Commonwealth's public higher education properties. The Council of Presidents wholeheartedly supports the Governor's recommendations and have requested legislative support for this line item.

We are also excited to work with Secretary Tutwiler, Secretary Gorzkowicz and DCAMM on a new process for capital projects on our campuses.

Beacon Hill and Capitol Hill

At the end of February, my colleagues and I held our business meeting at MassArt. It was great to gather at this unique institution where we were surrounded by creativity and innovation with its eclectic combination of galleries, classrooms, studios, and living spaces. It should be no surprise that their graduates, like all public higher education alumni, go on to do amazing things.

I would like to take a minute to congratulate MassArt architecture alumnus Stephen St. Russell and his husband David for being the big winners of HGTV's newest show "Battle on the Mountain," where they successfully competed to add the most value to a mountainside property. Their award-winning design skills are a testament to the value of a Massachusetts public higher education degree.

The day after our business meeting, several of the presidents headed to the State House for advocacy meetings with House and Senate leadership to discuss our state university budget priorities. We received a warm welcome from our elected officials and their staff. It was heartening to hear that our State House leaders understand the critical need for financial investments in our students and our campuses, as well as the importance of being able to offer an affordable and high-quality public higher education.

We also had excellent discussions with legislative leaders around the need to amend the General Laws to permit our institutions to offer Professional Practice Doctorate Degrees, an issue I raised at the last BHE meeting. Our state's workforce is facing a critical shortage of qualified and credentialed applicants for jobs that require this type of degree. It is crucial that the state offer affordable and accessible public higher education pathways to these PPDs. The Council of Presidents is re-engaging once again with UMass about the need to have the state universities offer professional practice doctorates. We would appreciate this Board's support in our efforts to amend this law.

Now let's go from Beacon Hill to Capitol Hill. Last month representatives from the state universities traveled to Washington, D.C. to meet with members of the Massachusetts

Congressional Delegation and their staff. Our colleagues advocated for several issues that impact student affordability, including doubling Pell grants and the need to ensure our students have access to mental and behavioral health services. They also highlighted the Council of Presidents' supports of AASCU's efforts to encourage Congress to expand new infrastructure funding to all public four-year colleges and universities.

Conclusion

Thank you for providing me with the opportunity to share this update from our state universities.

I will take one last minute with some bragging rights about some news on campus. Salem State University was recognized as the highest ranked college or university in Massachusetts for social mobility by CollegeNet. This acknowledges the extent to which the university educates economically disadvantaged students (family income below national median) at lower tuition and graduates them into good paying jobs.

I am happy to answer any questions you may have.