

State Universities BHE Segmental Report – October 19, 2021

Good Morning, Chairman Gabrieli, Secretary Peyser, Commissioner Santiago 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.

I begin my remarks as I have done since the start of the pandemic thanking the Board of Higher Education, Commissioner Santiago and Secretary Peyser for the support you continue to provide to our State Universities. While we are all encouraged to see the positive COVID number decrease from month to month, the Council of Presidents continues to appreciate the support provided by the Department of Higher Education and the Executive Office as we continue to address the challenges facing our campuses. On behalf of my colleagues, we appreciate your continued assistance and guidance.

Fall 2021 System Updates:

I am pleased to share with you an encouraging back to campus update, as well as information on the health and safety protocols that are in place for our students and employees for the fall semester.

As we announced at the last BHE meeting all nine state universities developed post-pandemic return plans that keep the health and safety of our campus communities as our top priority. With comprehensive health and safety protocols in place, we were able to bring back campus fall traditions after an unprecedented eighteen months. The state universities are offering a traditional schedule of in-person classes, as well as online and hybrid options for both residential and commuter student populations. In-person Convocations, Homecoming and Family weekends, and athletic events have never felt so essential and meaningful. Although we continue to address the ongoing challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, we remain optimistic about the gradual return to pre-pandemic life and traditional on-campus operations.

Our campuses are once again full of activity and our students are thrilled to be back in the actual classroom, engaged in athletics and clubs, and taking part in the full college experience. To provide you with an example of the energy on campus, I share this. In mid-September, MCLA hosted our annual President's Ice Cream Social and Student Club fair. There were dozens of student clubs represented and some provided impromptu performances including several from our dance club. This event was better attended by students, faculty and staff than any in recent memory. Students were smiling and happy to be having ice cream sundaes with their friends, and to learn about all the activities student life has to offer.

As you know, the state universities require our students, staff and faculty to be vaccinated against COVID-19. Students are required to be vaccinated to attend in-person classes and participate in campus life activities. Employees must be vaccinated to work on campus. Religious and medical exemptions to the COVID-19 vaccine requirement are available for students and employees.

These exemptions are reviewed and granted consistent with past campus practices and state law.

In addition to the vaccine requirement, our campuses also have implemented varying levels of mask requirements with most of our campuses requiring students, employees and visitors to wear masks in all public and academic, indoor campus spaces, regardless of social distancing or vaccination. All nine state universities continue to offer COVID testing for students and employees on their campuses and contact tracing to ensure we are doing our part to stop transmission of the COVID-19 virus. Although not required by the state to do so, we believe it is important to be fully transparent with our communities in the spread of COVID-19 on our campuses. Therefore, all our campuses update and share COVID-19 data weekly through a public facing COVID dashboard.

With the cooperation of our students, staff and faculty, we are happy to report that the state universities have nearly a 100 percent compliance rate with our health and safety mandates and protocols

and an overall vaccination rate that exceeds 90 percent across our system. As a result of our efforts to curb the spread of COVID, our system positivity rate is well below one percent.

Coming out of the pandemic, the State Universities remain high quality institutions that serve students in the Commonwealth and beyond. We need to look no further than this year's US News and World Report Rankings. Our State Universities are ranked across the board as top regional universities and colleges, a top ten public liberal arts institution, and perhaps most importantly, our institutions are ranked high in the Social Mobility category: This list measures how well our institutions graduate students who receive federal Pell Grants, typically awarded to students whose families make less than \$50,000, though most Pell Grant money goes to families with income below \$20,000. I am quite pleased to share with you that US News ranked MCLA 21st on this scale among public and private institutions nationally with only two other public institutions with a higher

ranking. MCLA has earned the highest ranking in Massachusetts on this scale.

ARPA and Supplemental Budget Requests

Over the next few weeks and months, the legislature will decide how the state will use the American Rescue Plan Act funds and surplus revenue from the FY21 fiscal year. I would like to share with this board some of the areas of need that the state universities have asked the state to consider when allocating the ARPA and surplus revenue.

We believe our state universities are an essential element of any future economic recovery plan. Investments of one-time funds in critical areas would improve the affordability and financial stability of our state universities and would bring much-needed relief to post-secondary students and their families. The Council of Presidents has asked members of the legislature for investments in the state university system which focus on the four priority areas for the use of Fiscal Recovery Funds surplus state funds, which include

addressing pandemic related recovery needs; reducing barriers to education and prosperity; investing in campus deferred maintenance, IT infrastructure and physical plant improvements; and direct and indirect student support initiatives.

I would like to share with you the advocacy letters submitted by the Council of Presidents to the legislature for your reference. Recognizing time is limited and there is an important discussion following our system updates, I will simply say that we would welcome your support of our requests for one-time, non-recurring allocation of the ARPA and FY21 surplus funds. With investment by the state in these critical areas described in our advocacy letters, our state universities will emerge from the pandemic with the ability to provide the best value-proposition for Massachusetts residents to earn a four-year degree and to offer more affordable pathways to our students.

Bargaining Update

I would also like to share an update with you on our contract negotiations with three of the employee bargaining units.

Throughout the pandemic, our employees served a key role in ensuring academic continuity and implementing a sound safe return plan. Our Council of Presidents is deeply appreciative of how our employees helped to navigate our campuses through the most challenging times and we continued to advocate for a reasonable, fair, and meaningful set of economic parameters indicative of our gratitude for our colleagues' work. We are hopeful the fourth contract will be settled shortly.

We are pleased to report that three of the four labor unions at the state universities have reached agreement on a three-year successor to their collective bargaining agreements that includes COVID-related health and safety provisions, a vaccination requirement and institutional mask-wearing policies and procedures.

The Council of Presidents has informed the House and Senate leadership that agreements have been reached on these three contracts and advocated for the inclusion of adequate funding in the state's salary reserve line item to cover the costs of these contract obligations along with the statutory language that acknowledges these contracts. As soon as these agreements are ratified and approved by A&F, we will work to ensure that the legislature includes adequate funding and statutory language for these salary increases in the next possible supplemental budget.

Tom Simard:

Lastly, I would like to thank Tom Simard for his work as Department CFO and wish him well as he starts his new position as the agency CFO for the Massachusetts Trial Courts. Tom is recognized by campus leaders as our advocate on campus funding and finances with the administration and legislature. The work he has done for this board, for the DHE and for our campuses over the past four years

cannot be overstated. Our Massachusetts public higher education system has been well served by his commitment.

Tom, on behalf of the nine state university presidents, our CFOs, and our Council of Presidents Executive Office, thank you for a job well done. We wish you success in your new position and all the best in future endeavors.

Thank you for allowing me this time to share an update from our state universities. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.