

**State Universities BHE Segmental Report by President James Birge (MCLA)**  
**December 14, 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.

**Fall 2021 System Update**

While I look forward to a time when I no longer have to open my remarks with a COVID report, I will share with you a brief update. I am pleased to report that our nine-member system had a successful fall with very low positivity rates. The coordination of mitigation measures -- including the vaccine requirement, indoor masking, COVID testing, contact tracing and isolation protocols -- has allowed our state universities to hunt for and reduce the transmission of the virus on our campuses.

Nevertheless, our institutions are planning for the likely arrival of the Omicron variant. In order to combat the uptick in breakthrough cases that holiday travel and this variant may bring, we are keeping our health and safety protocols in place for our students and employees through the winter months.

All of our campuses are requiring students, employees and visitors to wear masks in all public indoor campus spaces, regardless of social distancing or vaccination. The state universities have COVID vaccine requirements that include booster shots for all of our employees. We are planning to meet with the unions in the coming weeks to ensure all employees are fully vaccinated with a COVID booster when they are eligible to receive a one. We are also talking with our students to encourage them to get the booster, if they are eligible, before returning to campus for the next semester.

Our primary objective continues to be providing a safe learning and living environment through the fall and spring semesters. As the colder weather requires us to spend more time indoors, we will remain vigilant on our campuses. All our presidents are closely monitoring the situations at their institutions. If the number of cases rise considerably in the state and on our campuses after our students return after winter break, we will be ready to pivot to more strict protocols.

## **ARPA Bill**

As you know, Governor Baker has signed into law the \$4 billion American Rescue Plan Act spending package. We thank the legislature for passing a bill that includes:

- \$30 million to mitigate the financial impacts of the pandemic and for maintenance projects on our campuses;

- \$5 million for grants to public institutions of higher education to address student behavioral and mental health needs;
- \$5 million for state universities for the endowment incentive program; and
- \$1 million for college food security grants through the Hunger-Free Campus initiative.

My colleagues and I are grateful for the investment of one-time funds in these critical areas. This funding will not only help our campuses manage the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also improve the affordability and financial stability of our state universities. We thank the board and the department for your leadership and advocacy throughout this process.

### **Collective Bargaining Update**

I would also like to share the latest update on our contract negotiations with the employee bargaining units. I am pleased to report that all four of our campus bargaining units came to agreement on three-year labor agreements for their unit members. Commissioner Santiago, we appreciate the efforts by you and your staff for their work through our negotiations and to expedite the 150E collective bargaining process.

Included in your board materials is the proposed budget for the DHE which includes the incremental costs of those collective bargaining agreements. On behalf of my colleagues, we endorse this budget proposal and ask the board to support the recommendations made by the department. The Council of Presidents supports and endorses the department's efforts to expand the MassGrant Plus Program and extend it to our state university campuses. We want to go on the record in support of the state universities funding formula line item as well as the state universities internship incentive program.

I have stated this in my previous remarks, but it is worth repeating. Throughout the pandemic, our employees have been instrumental in ensuring academic continuity and implementing a sound safe return plan. Our Council of Presidents continue to be deeply appreciative of how our employees continue to navigate our campuses through these demanding times. The successful collective bargaining agreement processes provide for retroactive base salary increases as well as a one-time bonus recognizing the efforts of our colleagues during this unprecedented time. Nonetheless, our employees have not yet received these funds. It is the CoP's top priority to ensure that the administration and the legislature include adequate funding and the required statutory language in the next possible supplemental budget so that these much-deserved salary increases can be paid out to our employees as

expeditiously as possible. **Thanks Secy Peyser.** Any assistance that you can provide to assure that your employees receive the well-deserved increases would be deeply appreciated.

### **Student Success:**

The State Universities are in full support and ready to collaborate with the Commissioner and the Department of Higher Education to educate the next generation of students in the Commonwealth and execute the Department's leading work with the Equity Agenda. The State Universities fully support the Department's efforts to ensure that all students have equal access to a high quality and affordable pathways to a college education. We also endorse and support the Board's efforts to expand the Early College programming across the Commonwealth. National research and local results show that that participation in early college programs significantly increases college enrollment, completion, and affordability among racially minoritized students.

The Department of Higher Education has once again partnered with Deloitte to support efforts to design a Strategic Framework for Support Services for Student Success (SFSSSS). The project is partially funded by EOE and seeks to adopt a holistic approach in designing a strategic framework that will complement and build

upon local initiatives in order to determine the best practices for campus support services.

The goal of the initiative is to provide greater consistency and equitable access to student services, especially for marginalized students, across all public colleges and universities.

At MCLA, we have implemented a success coaching model, where students work with professional advisors to triage support services they need and to assist them in connecting with the larger campus community for academic, social, and emotional supports. We will continue to adopt recommendations from the New Undergraduate Experience working group that illustrated students want support at moments of transition, to see their identities reflected and valued in our curriculum and throughout campus, and to have a voice in decisions that reflect them.

## **Conclusion**

On behalf of my colleagues, I thank this board, Secretary Peyser, Commissioner Santiago and your staff for your continued support of these critical initiatives, especially as we come out of the pandemic, to serve our students at such a pivotal time. Thank you for providing me with this opportunity to share this update from our state universities. I wish you all Happy Holidays and I look forward to meeting

in 2022. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.