



COP Remarks on Behalf of the State University System to the Board of Higher Education
One Ashburton Pl, Boston, MA
February 4, 2020

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 the opportunity to provide an update on the Massachusetts State University System.

I want to begin this morning by thanking the board for your FY21 budget recommendations and recognizing that the governor's budget includes an increase of \$5m to begin extending the MassGrant Plus program to the state universities. My colleagues and I commend the department and this board for your work to make equity, affordability and financial aid your focus. In your FY21 budget recommendation narrative you state: "To address the affordability of higher education as a barrier to access and opportunity, our primary focus has been to develop strategies to address the unmet need for the financial costs of public higher education. We feel that unmet need for Pell eligible students attending a public higher education institution must be addressed as fully and quickly as possible. We are committed to building a long-term funding strategy to support Massachusetts students' college success, especially as seen through an equity lens." We agree and support your efforts.

As the FY21 budget process continues, we intend to advocate for an increase in the financial aid line item that fully covers the cost of attendance for our most needy students. According to DHE data, the state universities have nearly 11,000 Pell eligible students with a zero EFC and an unmet need gap of \$18.2 million. We have worked hard to keep the cost of attendance at our universities down but we know that affordability is a barrier for many of our students, especially those coming from gateway cities and underrepresented populations. As you are aware, MassGrant, once covered about 85% of a public college student's cost of attendance; now it covers less than 10%. With the buying power of Federal financial aid continuing to diminish, students are increasingly dependent on state aid, institutional aid, and student loans to close cost gaps. We applaud your efforts to bring attention to this need and ask you to join with us in lobbying for a significant increase in student financial aid.

Last week, Dr. Dale Hamel, Executive Vice President at Framingham State provided the department a six-year analysis of financial aid programs and the impact direct student aid has on student success and retention at his university. He found that for every additional thousand dollars in financial aid provided to a first-year student, the probability of retaining that student

increased by 10%. Direct financial aid doesn't just help curb student debt, but it appears to dramatically increase the time to graduation and persistence rates of students attending our institutions.

And why is it that we should be concerned about investment for our public higher education students? We know that public higher education is the best, and in most cases, the only pathway for social and economic mobility. A recent editorial in the Sentinel and Enterprise Newspaper highlights the work that we are doing at my institution, Fitchburg State, to ensure students attending the university graduate with the tools necessary for social mobility. The editorial cites a recent US News and World Report publication that ranks Fitchburg State as a top performer in the country on social mobility in the magazine's Best Colleges 2020 rankings. The editorial states that with an emphasis on serving disadvantaged students, "Fitchburg State University graduates experience strong social mobility and get high returns on their educational investment." This is not unique to Fitchburg State. In fact, this is happening every day at all our state universities, community colleges and UMass campuses.

While the need to close funding gaps for our most needy students has never been greater, the state's share of funding for higher education over nearly two decades has been falling, currently hovering around 20 percent. Adjusted for inflation, Massachusetts higher education funding has fallen by 31 percent per student during this time period. Massachusetts ranks 34th in the nation in funding for public higher education; well behind states like California, New York, and North Carolina. In fact, New Jersey provides almost five times the aid to needy students in comparison to Massachusetts. It is important for us to continue to work in this area and do better.

Financial aid, closing funding gaps, and ensuring that our public college and university students have the resources to provide high-quality and affordable degree pathways is our number one priority. It is critical to our state's economy; it is critical to our mission; and it is critical to offer opportunities for social mobility. I ask that you join me and my colleagues in our efforts to lobby the legislature to build upon the Governor's budget recommendations.

Lastly, I close with our request that this board consider adjusting your budget recommendation process to better align with the development of the Governor's fiscal year spending plan. If the board were to begin the budget process during your annual summer retreat with a goal to have a board approved budget by your September meeting, as opposed to what has been traditionally November or December, more time would be available to share the rationale of your budget with legislators prior to the spending plan deadline in January.

Thank you again for allowing me to offer remarks and I look forward to continuing our work together.