

DHE

## COMMISSIONER'S SELF EVALUATION

**Note.** The following evaluation was submitted to the Chair of the Board of Higher Education (BHE) on January 27, 2025.

### INTRODUCTION

Year two of my tenure as Commissioner for the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education (DHE) marked a period of continued investment in public higher education. Notably, the state legislature allocated nearly \$94 million in new financial aid resources for Fiscal Year 2024 (FY24). This represents a significant increase, with Massachusetts more than doubling its financial aid investment from \$175 million in FY23 to over \$375 million in FY24. In addition to making public four-year institutions tuition free for a Pell-grant recipients and community college free for all, these funds have positioned Massachusetts as a national leader in need-based financial aid, demonstrating our commitment to making college truly affordable for all learners.

FY24 saw further commitments to institution-led student success programs. The budget included a new \$14 million appropriation for state colleges and universities to expand wraparound services that support student persistence and completion. This builds on a similar \$14 million appropriation for community colleges. These initiatives underscore the administration's belief in the power of combining affordability with comprehensive student success strategies, aligning well with the goals established in the Board's Strategic Higher Education Finance (SHEF) framework. This framework continues to guide the department's work, especially in areas of budgetary advocacy and resource distribution.

As these new investments grow, so too do expectations for higher education in Massachusetts. It is now critical that the Department, in collaboration with the Board of Higher Education (BHE), create the conditions necessary for our institutions to recruit, graduate, and close equity gaps across our state. In this context, I present this self-evaluation, which highlights my efforts to lead the agency in meeting the Board's expectations and ensuring effective stewardship of state funds.

This evaluation will briefly reflect on the goals set in the previous year, focusing on team building, advocacy, and aligning with the BHE's overarching priorities. The goals, listed below, serve as a guiding framework for the department and basis for the evaluation of my work in calendar year 2024:

1. Establish multi-year top priorities and near-term action agendas with the Board to focus the BHE and DHE on a few accountable policy imperatives.
2. Improve the Department's engagement with the Board, including refining meeting structures, agendas, and communication strategies.
3. Continue to improve the Department's efficiencies and outputs.

4. Position the Board and Department as a more visible and engaged key resource in policy development for the field, working with state policymakers, stakeholders, and the community.

The following sections outline my progress on these goals for 2024, as well as new goals for the year ahead.

### **A QUICK UPDATE ON GOALS SET FOR CALENDAR YEAR 2023**

Before diving into 2024 goals, I want to update you on the work initiated in 2023 to strengthen team capacity and recruit new talent to the leadership team. Over the past year, we successfully welcomed five new members to the executive team and filled nearly 15 vacant positions across the department. However, in April 2024, a temporary hiring moratorium was imposed across the Commonwealth, which impacted our capacity-building efforts. Despite these constraints, we relied on temporary consultants and policy fellows to continue delivering on the department's priorities.

While the hiring moratorium placed strain on the team, I worked closely with my executive team to prioritize resources and ensure that our institutional partners continued to receive the support they needed. I am immensely grateful to the team for their resilience and dedication in managing this challenging period. Although the hiring freeze is now lifted, we continue to focus on rebuilding capacity to ensure long-term sustainability.

### **GOALS FOR CALENDAR YEAR 2024**

**Goal One:** Establish key multi-year top priorities and near-term action agendas with the Board.

A key challenge for the department has been determining how best to direct our efforts to achieve transformative change while balancing competing demands from various stakeholders, including the administration, the legislature, accrediting bodies, and others. To address this, we initiated an effort to identify a set of core, multi-year priorities for the department that would guide our work moving forward.

Building on the Board's Strategic Higher Education Finance (SHEF) framework and the state's equity agenda, I worked with the Board Chair to identify and propose priorities that align with the broader policy goals of the administration. This process, which included input from Board members through retreats and other solicited feedback, is expected to culminate at the start of calendar year 2025, with the Board's adoption of a focused set of strategic priorities. These will allow us to concentrate efforts on a few, high-impact initiatives that aim to increase equitable access and success in postsecondary education.

Initially, we are emphasizing the importance of economic mobility, ensuring that learners are able to transition smoothly between educational opportunities and earn a livable wage. This focus on mobility will also the agency to make a stronger case about the value proposition of

higher education. As technological advances continue to reshape the landscape of higher education, we are also exploring innovative ways to better meet the expectations of contemporary students. I look forward to continuing to refine and implement these priorities over the next year.

**Goal Two:** Improve the Department's engagement with the Board.

Both in 2023 and 2024, I made it a priority to enhance the Board's understanding of the department's work by improving communication and engagement. The "Commissioner's Spotlights," introduced in Board meetings, have become a valuable tool for showcasing the breadth of the department's activities and their direct impact on students and communities. This has fostered deeper engagement from Board members and enriched the input we receive on ongoing initiatives.

In collaboration with the Board Chair, we also explored ways to optimize the structure of Board and committee meetings to better serve our strategic goals. A new task force structure is under development, which will complement our regular meetings and allow us to leverage expertise from both Board members and external scholars and policy experts. This will enhance the Board's capacity to drive the department's work forward and ensure that our meetings are more productive and aligned with our priorities.

**Goal Three:** Continue to improve the efficiencies and outputs of the Department.

Improving the department's efficiency remains a core priority, especially in high-impact areas such as financial aid, grant administration, and the timely distribution of funds. While the hiring moratorium slowed some of our progress in building capacity, we made notable strides in improving our processes, particularly through new leadership in the Offices of Academic Affairs and Finance.

We continue to work closely with the Executive Office of Education to expedite fund disbursements and regularly engage stakeholders such as institutional CFOs and financial aid officers to refine our processes. While progress has been made, further improvements are needed, particularly in integrating technology to modernize our infrastructure. We are exploring options for additional investments in technology and process redesign to increase efficiency and reliability across the department.

**Goal Four:** Raise the profile of the Board and the Department as a key resource in policy development.

Over the past year, we have worked to strengthen relationships with key state legislators and stakeholders, particularly co-chairs of the higher education committees. This renewed partnership has positioned the Board as a valuable resource in policy discussions, and we have seen an increase in inquiries about data and policy recommendations.

Nationally, the department has also gained visibility, engaging in discussions with other states and joining communities of practice that address common challenges in higher education. These collaborations have not only strengthened our position but also provided opportunities to attract expertise from across the country. As we continue to engage with policymakers and stakeholders, I am confident that our expanding network will further enhance the department's ability to drive impactful policy development.

## **CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

This past year has been one of overcoming significant challenges, particularly in building capacity amid a hiring moratorium. Despite these constraints, our leadership team's dedication and resilience have allowed us to meet our obligations and advocate for systemic improvements in higher education. Massachusetts is now recognized for its bold investments in financial aid and its commitment to making college accessible for all learners.

Looking ahead, the department must continue to build the expertise and capacity needed to fully deliver on its responsibilities. The lessons learned over the past year will inform our strategies for the coming year, and I remain committed to advancing the goals outlined for 2024. I am confident that the work we are doing will position Massachusetts as a model for accessible, equitable, and innovative higher education. With this objective in mind, the following goals have been developed to help direct my efforts, and that of the Department in the coming year. The calendar 2025 goals are as follows:

## **NEW GOALS FOR CALENDAR YEAR 2025**

1. Finalize and adopt top priorities and meet initial actionable agendas for the BHE and DHE.
2. Create an Innovation Hub within the DHE and launch several pilots that help to deliver on the Board priorities.
3. Advance on the Economic Mobility priority to reporting a new, more advanced metric and engaging campuses in its meaning and identify initial actions the BHE/DHE can take to raise up economic mobility.
4. Adopt a Financial Aid and Success Funding Priority building from the work of the CHEQA committee and the SHEF framework.
5. Work with Chair and key members of the staff to strengthen Board engagement through Task Force structures and deeper collaboration.