

MASSACHUSETTS BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

December 3, 2024

10:00 a.m.

Via Zoom

Meeting Minutes

A meeting of the Board of Higher Education (BHE or Board) was held on Tuesday, December 3, 2024, remotely via teleconference (Zoom).

The following Board Members were present:

Chris Gabrieli, Chair

Danielle Allen

Mary Burns

Harneen Chernow

Ann Christensen

Veronica Conforme

Alex Cortez

Paul Mattera

Niki Nguyen, Voting Student Member, State University segment

Judy Pagliuca

Christina Royal

Patrick Tutwiler, Secretary of Education

Bill Walczak

Thalles De Souza, non-voting Student Advisor, UMass segment

Noe Ortega, Commissioner and Secretary to the Board

The following Board Members or Advisors were absent:

Imani-Barbour, non-voting Student Advisor, State University segment

I. CALL TO ORDER

Board Chair Chris Gabrieli called the meeting to order at 10:03 a.m. Nicole Johnson, Director of Board and Community Relations, took roll call attendance (see above for attendance roster).

II. COMMISSIONER'S SPOTLIGHT

[List of Documents Used](#)

[Commissioner's Spotlight](#)

Commissioner Ortega welcomed everyone. He expressed excitement over the work done in the first half of the academic year. He gave a brief overview of what is to be discussed in the spotlight, which includes:

- Overview of DHE's Imperative, Goal and Strategic Priorities
- Budget Proposal
- High-Impact Innovation Goals

Overview of DHE's Imperative, Goal and Strategic Priorities

Commissioner Ortega stated that the key driver of the Department of Higher Education's (Department or DHE) efforts is creating conditions for equitable and affordable, high-quality postsecondary opportunities for all learners in Massachusetts. The same ideology influences the Department's structure and budget memos, as well as policies and programs implemented at institutions of higher education. Similarly, conditions that can enhance equitable and affordable high-quality postsecondary opportunities for all learners in Massachusetts are regularly discussed in routine meetings with institutional leaders.

The Commissioner also shared that most of the Department's work is in service to advancing equity - to reduce, by at least half, the racial, ethnic, and economic disparities that persist in the provision of postsecondary opportunity and success in Massachusetts.

The strategic priorities of the Department include:

- Continuing to roll out and sustain a compelling set of clear and consistent state financial commitments to making college affordable for students and well-supported to raise success. The idea is to ensure that people persist, succeed, complete their education and are prepared to enter the workforce and be contributors to the Commonwealth of

Massachusetts.

- Significantly increasing the socioeconomic mobility benefits of postsecondary participation in Massachusetts.
- Improving the alignment between postsecondary education opportunities and Massachusetts workforce and civic needs. The Commissioner noted that this was preliminarily discussed at the Board's most recent retreat and will be revisited in January.
- Expanding the role of the Board and Department in facilitating and fostering high-impact innovation among institutions and across the system by advancing new approaches to postsecondary opportunity and success for the full range of potential learners.

Commissioner Ortega highlighted that a lot of work has begun on the first two referenced priorities, and the Department looks forward to the Board further discussing the other two priorities.

Commissioner Ortega also gave a brief update on the Strategic Higher Education Finance (SHEF) Goals that were adopted two years ago. The SHEF system closely aligns with the Department's strategic priorities and was designed to address the following goals:

- Making college more accessible and affordable for students.
- Bolstering institutional funding to support student success.
- Ensuring system-level capacity to foster innovation and collaboration.
- Aligning incentives on cost sharing between the state and campuses.
- Increasing simplicity, transparency, and predictability for all.

Commissioner Ortega stated that getting all five SHEF goals right will positively impact students' experiences at public institutions of higher education in Massachusetts.

Fair Share (Education and Transportation Fund)

Commissioner Ortega invited Deputy Commissioner for Administration, Finance and Operations Matt Cole to provide an overview of how the budget recommendations on today's agenda support both the SHEF goals and the proposed strategic priorities.

Deputy Commissioner Cole gave a historical overview of Fair Share FY24 and FY25 Funding. In FY24, Fair Share was funded at \$1 billion with 52% dedicated to education and 48% allocated towards transportation. In FY25, Fair Share was funded at \$1.3 billion with 59% dedicated to education and 41% allocated towards transportation. He noted that these Fair Share budgeted amounts are conservative estimates of the 4% surtax collections. However, the actual collections for FY25 are \$2.2 billion with the use of the surplus funds still in consideration. Deputy Commissioner Cole shared that during this two-year period, the DHE received \$219 million and \$229 million in FY24 and FY25 respectively, equaling 22% of the fund in FY24 and 18% of the fund in FY25, while indicating a percentage drop in what the DHE received in FY25 compared to FY24.

Deputy Commissioner Cole mentioned that the proposed FY26 budget recommendations were developed using guiding principles from the SHEF framework. He stated that the budget was approached from a holistic perspective that ensures investment in both students and institutions. The process included support and expansion for programs tied to strategic priorities, such as dual enrollment and early college programs, while also maintaining the current, significant investments in financial aid and all that has already been achieved in making public higher education more accessible and more affordable. Deputy Commissioner Cole noted that there will also be an ad campaign to raise awareness of these financial aid investments and bring attention to the fact that Massachusetts students may now qualify for significant financial aid for which they would not have previously qualified. Similarly, other financial barriers to attending college have been identified. Through wraparound, support services, the Department seeks to ensure that resources are available to address barriers to student success when students first arrive to campus, ensuring that they will ultimately graduate and obtain paying jobs in the workforce. Also, there will be investment in infrastructure development where the actual learning takes place. Deputy Commissioner Cole emphasized that innovation is central to all of these investment strategies.

Facilitating and Fostering High-Impact Innovation

Commissioner Ortega reminded the Board of discussions at the Board retreat about facilitating and fostering high-impact innovation. He continued, stating that the focus on innovation is intended to be centered on the following:

- Dedicated capacity - align organizational capacity and resources to execute on this priority.
- System-focused - focus on innovation at the systems level that has the potential to address shared priorities and challenges across campuses.
- Pilot and evaluate - incubate promising approaches by piloting with interested

- campuses; make decisions to discontinue, adjust, or scale based on ongoing evaluation.
- Enhance impact through technology - prioritize technology solutions with the potential to meet learner and campus needs more effectively.
 - Enabling policy and resources - establish enabling conditions for innovations through policy and sustainable resources.

IV. OTHER BUSINESS

Chair Gabrieli stated that there would be a change in the order of the agenda. He announced that he is moving the presentation noted under "other business" to now, since the presentation aligns with the goals and the initiatives the Commissioner just shared during his Spotlight. Hearing no objections, Commissioner Ortega proceeded accordingly.

- **Presentation On BHE's Degree Granting Authority/ Proposals for Reduced Credit Degrees**

Commissioner Ortega began by reminding the Board of a discussion held during the June 2024 Board meeting on the subject of baccalaureate degrees consisting of fewer than 120 credit hours. This has been a point of discussion not only in Massachusetts but across the country. He stated that the Department has been working with the accreditor, the New England Commission for Higher Education (NECHE), and he invited NECHE President Lawrence M. Schall to speak to the issue and provide us with NECHE's perspective. Before inviting President Schall to come forward, the Board was provided with an educational information session to gain a better sense of the Board's authority in this area and what is happening both here and nationally in this area. The Board then heard from Associate Commissioner for Regulatory and Veterans Affairs Cindy Brown, Deputy Commissioner for Academic Affairs and Student Success Richard Riccardi, and Chief Legal Counsel Dena Papanikolaou who shed more light on this topic.

Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou began by setting the context for today's discussion and confirming that there is no Board vote or action requested today. Rather, this is a foundational and informational discussion for a matter that Department staff anticipate being in a position to bring before the Board for potential action during an upcoming meeting later this academic year. Specifically, we anticipate advancing to the Board for consideration a proposal for a reduced credit bachelor's degree - also called a "three-year degree."

For context, Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou presented a high-level overview of the Board's statutory role and responsibilities. She stated that, in its broadest sense, the Board has coordinating, governing, and/or regulatory authority in varying degrees over all public and private (independent) institutions of higher education (IHEs) located in the Commonwealth and authorized to grant degrees. This includes, of course, all 29 public IHEs, and 80 private (independent) IHEs currently operating, though four are in the process of either closing or being acquired. As of today, therefore, there are 109 active post-secondary institutions located in

Massachusetts. She explained that these institutions are very diverse in terms sizes, missions and student bodies - with several large institutions offering multiple, comprehensive programs to thousands of enrolled students; as well as several very small, niche and/or religiously affiliated institutions offering one or two programs with student enrollment barely over 100.

Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou reviewed the varying degrees of authority the Board has over the different sectors and segments. For the public higher education sector, the Board is a coordinating board with some significant governing authority. And for the Massachusetts private higher education sector, the Board serves what is best described as a consumer protection function. The Board, acting by and through the Commissioner and the Department, is responsible for ensuring that students and families are well-informed and that their consumer rights are protected. Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou added that the Board serves the same consumer protection role over the Commonwealth's public IHEs, but the role over private IHEs is limited to this very broad consumer protection function.

Chief Legal Counsel reviewed and summarized a PowerPoint slide with examples of this consumer protection function and stated that while all consumer protection functions - either separately or collectively - are important, today's discussion is focused on the Board's institutional authorization and program approval authority.

She stated that under federal law, post-secondary institutions wanting to receive Title IV funding must be authorized in each state where they operate. And how that is implemented in Massachusetts under state law is that any entity that is chartered or amends its charter after 1943 and seeks to operate in Massachusetts and offer degrees (or courses leading to a degree) must be authorized and approved by the Board of Higher Education. She explained the significance of year 1943, stating that this is the year that the Board was established. Prior to 1943, the legislature authorized or chartered institutions directly. However, as a result of influx of federal GI Bill funding after the war for post-secondary education, the Massachusetts legislature created the Board of Higher Education as a consumer protection agency to authorize and approve institutions for this funding. Under the Board's enabling legislation, institutions in existence prior to the Board's creation (1943) were grandfathered in and they do not fall under the Board's authorization or degree-granting approval authority as long as those institutions stay within and do not amend their existing charter. This includes, by way of example - and relevant to today's discussion - adding new degree offerings not specified in their charters, such as a three-year degree.

Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou continued, stating that while several institutions have come and gone since 1943 (or have amended their charters), currently there are 21 IHEs established prior to 1943, and therefore do not fall under the Board's purview for degree-granting authority (unless they amend their charters). The remaining 59 IHEs are under the Board's program approval and degree-granting authority statute and regulations, including the regulation that defines minimum credit hours for a degree. Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou confirmed that all public colleges and universities are similarly under the Board's program approval and degree-granting authority, including definitions on minimum credit hours for degrees.

Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou noted that while the Board's approval authority over the private and public sectors is essentially the same on this topic, the statutes and implementing procedures are different for each sector. She reviewed a PowerPoint slide which summarized the statutes and implementing procedures for each sector. For private IHEs, the Board is statutorily mandated to establish and enforce standards regarding mission, leadership and organization, financial structures and sustainability, programs of study, faculty and staff qualifications, physical resources, and the like. This statute is very prescriptive and includes a very specific list of standards that the legislature wants the Board to review and confirm. She stated that the Board does this through regulation, and the Board's regulations include minimum credit hours needed for a baccalaureate degree (120 credits) and for an associate's degree (60 credits). Accordingly, in order to allow for proposals such as one that we anticipate bringing to the Board later this year for a sub-120 baccalaureate degree (a three-year degree) from a private IHE, the Board would need to amend its private IHE degree-granting regulations (610 CMR 2.00) or issue some sort of policy to allow for this flexibility. Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou noted that President Larry Schall from NECHE will be speaking to similar challenges that NECHE experienced in trying to accommodate a three-year degree proposal, including policies that they had to issue or amend.

With regard to the public sector, Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou confirmed that while the Board's statutory authority and implementation procedures are different, the same rules for minimum credit hours needed for degree attainment also apply to degrees offered by public IHEs. Any necessary, corresponding changes to credit hours defined in the public higher education realm of the Board's degree-granting work would be implemented through policy revisions.

Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou turned the presentation over to Associate Commissioner Cindy Brown. Associate Commissioner Brown led a discussion of the new-IHE application process. She shared that the process begins with the submission of an application, after which the visiting committee is appointed by the Department. The work of the committee is to review the application and perform site visits. Once this is done, the committee generates a report about the readiness of the proposed institution, whether it is sufficiently resourced, or otherwise. This report is reviewed by Department staff and the applicant institution has an opportunity to respond. The Department continues to work with the institution until it is satisfied enough to advance a motion to the Board.

She continued that there are specific parts of the regulations that speak to credit hour requirements for the degrees. For an associate degree (2-year degree), it's a minimum of 60 credits. While a baccalaureate degree is expected to have a minimum of 120 credits hours. There is also specific language regarding the number of General Education credits, which is 36 credit hours for a Baccalaureate degree.

Associate Commissioner Brown reiterated that the institutions chartered or approved before 1943 are not under the Board's purview except for matters such as financial assessment, risk management, and Campus Safety and Violence Prevention (CSVP) work, as reviewed by Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou. She stated that it is possible for institutions with broad charters to have degree granting authority for all degrees, with the exception of medical or law degrees. Also, the institution's authority could be specific, meaning that the institution has to seek authority for each new degree that it wishes to offer, for which there is a process.

Associate Commissioner Brown added that a petition for degree-granting authority is required when an institution seeks authority to grant a degree at a new level or to grant a degree significantly different from those for which it is chartered. Associate Commissioner Brown informed the Board that the outcome of the staff analysis performed by the Department's Academic Affairs and Legal units is that a degree that does not conform to the Board's regulatory standards, such as bachelor's degrees that contain fewer than 120 credits hours, requires Board approval.

Associate Commissioner Brown further elaborated on the national trend of reduced credit degrees. She stated that there is a popular phrase called "college in three" which was originally a consortium of ten (10) institutions in 2021 with goals of reducing time and expense for a bachelor's degree. However, the coalition is now larger and more formalized. She shared some notable timelines of the movement:

- April 2023: College-in-3 convened the lead faculty from the project's first pilots.
- June 2023: Congress invited the Project to testify at a special subcommittee on "postsecondary innovation"
- March 2024: Policy partners advocated for "Experimental Site Status" by encouraging US DOE "to pilot activities to support and encourage accelerated, 3-year bachelor's degree programs, such as the 'College-in-3' project."
- March 2024: Indiana passed a higher education bill requiring most Indiana institutions to offer at least one three-year degree by July 2025.

Associate Commissioner Brown explained that there have been significant efforts to grow, scale and expand the "College in 3" movement, which not only reduces the required credits for a bachelor's degree to fewer than 120 credits, but also redefines the bachelor's degree as a degree of at least 120 credits "requiring no more than 3 years of continuous enrollment." She added that the Department is aware of one potential application by a Massachusetts institution to offer baccalaureate degrees of fewer than 120 credits.

To be more consistent in capturing this specific concept, and to allow for future consideration of minimum required credits at other degree levels, the Department is advancing the phrasing of "reduced credit degrees." She added that the Department believes that "reduced credit degree" is an emergent area of policy reexamination by state boards and boards of regents.

For further discussions, Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou invited Lawrence M. Schall, the President of New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE) for further insights. President Schall shared that the Commission has debated and discussed the topic over the past two years. He stated that the Commission has about nine (9) standards of quality including financial, academic, student services, and transparency. Under these standards are some form of lined paragraphs that can be viewed as regulations and one of them deals with credit hours and parallels what Massachusetts has - 120 credit hours for a baccalaureate degree, 60 credit hours for an associate's degree, and 30 credit hours for a master's degree programs. He shared that NECHE has a policy of innovation that allows institutions to execute proposals which may not totally conform to NECHE standards on an experimental basis, provided the institution proves that such proposals support and advance students rather than harm them. The experiment goes through a rigorous assessment process after which the institution is either allowed to continue the program or stop entirely. He continued that under the innovation policy in 2023, NECHE received two proposals for baccalaureate degrees with fewer than 120 credits. One was in Massachusetts and the other was in New Hampshire. The proposals were debated over two business meetings and a retreat, and both proposals were eventually declined on a stiff vote.

However, after declining the proposals, NECHE developed some guidelines that baccalaureate degrees with fewer than 120 credits must fulfil if they are to be considered by NECHE under the innovation policy.

Under the new guideline, three applications were received in 2024, one in Massachusetts (a repeat of the previous one), the other in New Hampshire (a public institution), and one in Rhode Island (a private institution), and all three of them were approved by the NECHE in a split vote that tilted in favor of the proposals. The one from Massachusetts was approved contingent upon the institution getting the necessary approvals they needed from the Board of Higher Education - which has not happened yet.

The guidelines for reduced credit degrees set by the New England Commission of Higher Education have four requirements:

- A naming requirement - Maintains that the name has to be different from just a baccalaureate degree. There has to be a prefix before the baccalaureate. The ones approved so far were titled "Applied Baccalaureate" and "Career Focused Baccalaureate".
- Transparency - This guideline is on the consumer protection side of things. The institutions need to prominently put in all their marketing materials that the program is different from a four-year degree and that there may be issues with regard to using the degree to get into graduate programs and how effective the degree might be in terms of getting jobs in the market. The transparency guideline requires a full declaration of risks.
- Assessment Requirement - This is a very extensive requirement and it includes the

success of students in getting a job and entering a graduate school.

- Curriculum - It has to be a minimum of 90 credits and a mix of major, general education and elective courses. However, the breakdown of the mix of courses is not specified.

President Schall further added that for each institution, four (4) programs (except for one institution with five programs) were approved and they tend to be specific and pre-professional (e.g., cybersecurity, police, robotics, hospitality management, graphic design and outdoor leadership) rather than traditional degree programs. Also, the institutions have claimed that one of their goals was to achieve the same learning outcomes for the students in the three years as they are for four-year degree programs. He shared that NECHE has been telling Massachusetts institutions that rather than come to NECHE to obtain approval contingent upon the Commonwealth approval from the Board, they should first obtain Commonwealth approval.

Chair Gabrieli thanked the presenters and opened the floor for question from the Board. Board Member Pagliuca commented that the topic should be viewed not only from the lens of reduced higher education cost but from the broad business/job needs landscape as those have also evolved over the years. She stated that, inasmuch as Massachusetts is a knowledge economy, it also requires a technical aspect to support it.

Chair Gabrieli recommended holding a special meeting no later than February 2025 to more broadly discuss the topic. He also asked Board members to carefully consider whether the approval will be to approve the one Massachusetts institution that is interested in doing a 3-year baccalaureate degree on an experimental basis or just make it a system-wide norm.

Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou noted the particular institution interested in offering a 3-year bachelor's degree program has yet to submit an application, and as such the timeline for potentially bringing a specific proposal to the Board is unclear.

Board Member Cortez said that he had very mixed feelings and wanted to understand now, or at a special meeting, what is the trade off? What is being given up for that fourth year of credit? Is it electives, general education, or requirements around a major? In addition, Member Cortez expressed what he called "philosophical concerns" with the proposal noting that it does get to some fundamental questions related to the purpose of a higher education degree in terms of what knowledge and skills are being conferred, against what we as a society think is important.

Member Allen agreed that a special session may well be important and stated that she had three questions. First, related to nomenclature, what is the reasoning for maintaining the baccalaureate nomenclature, as the programs move closer to associates degrees? Second, she said that while she is sympathetic to this proposal seemingly being in response to the pressures around the cost of higher education, she said she wanted to "second" Member Cortez's

philosophical questions around “what is lost.” And third, Member Allen had a question about credit hours as the way of measuring a degree and the quality of the degree and wondered if we could look at that a bit more directly. On that point, she asked whether assessing competencies is part of the conversation.

Board Member Mattera asked about the authority of the Board, and whether the statute prohibits this., Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou pointed out that while the Board is not statutorily prohibited from approving such applications, it does have a specific regulation that currently defines minimum credit hours needed for a degree and, at a minimum, this would need an amendment. A Board policy akin to NECHE’s innovation policy could also be adopted.

Board Members Mattera and Pagliuca agreed with Chair Gabrieli about having a special meeting for broader discussions, though Board Member Pagliuca suggested that both questions of “how” and “whether” to act should be on the agenda.

With the general consensus of Board members, Chair Gabrieli concluded the discussion by stating that he would work with the Commissioner to come up with a plan and a date for a special meeting to have a broader discussion on the topic and to examine whether to separate out how to handle the application of the institution that is currently interested in doing a 3-year bachelors from a broader discussion about how the Board would consider the topic system-wide.

V. ACCEPTANCE OF MINUTES:

Chair Gabrieli asked for a motion to accept the minutes from the BHE meeting held on October 22, 2024.

Board Member Bill Walczak pointed out that he was absent from the October 22nd BHE meeting but was not listed as such in the proposed meeting minutes.

Subject to the correction noted by Member Walczak, on a motion duly made and seconded the motion proceeded to a roll call vote and was approved unanimously by all members present as follows:

- Chair Chris Gabrieli – Yes
- Danielle Allen – Yes
- Mary Burns – Yes
- Harneen Chernow – Yes

- Ann Christensen – Yes
- Veronica Conforme – Yes
- Alex Cortez – Yes
- Paul Mattera – Yes
- Niki Nguyen - Yes
- Judy Pagliuca – Yes
- Christina Royal – Yes
- Secretary of Education, Tutwiler – Yes
- Bill Walczak- Yes

VI. REMARKS & REPORTS

A. Chair's Remarks

Chair Gabrieli acknowledged that the Department has been very busy recently and expressed appreciation to the Commissioner for the wonderful job being done. He reiterated to the Board that there is a commission required under budget language called the Commission on Higher Education Quality and Affordability. He stated that the commission has been meeting and that Board members are welcome to attend such meetings and access all related materials.

Chair Gabrieli shared that he is engaged in ongoing work toward developing a final draft of the innovation agenda priority, as well as the first and actionable draft of the socioeconomic mobility priority. He anticipates bringing those drafts forward during the Board retreat in January. He added that the Early College Joint Committee continues to meet with important progress on that front as well.

Chair Gabrieli added that the period ahead of the Board promises to be busy, between anticipated shifting priorities at the federal level concerning higher education and continuing changing conditions on the ground.

B. Secretary of Executive Office of Education's (EOE) Remarks

Secretary of Education Patrick Tutwiler extended public appreciation to the members of the Advisory Council for the Advancement of Representation in Education (ACARE). He stated that this diverse core of stakeholders leaned into the development of a formal set of recommendations to help ensure that the higher education student body reflects the Commonwealth's broad diversity. He stated remarked that the recommendations, which reflect best practices and firmly represent important core values, were formally released on October 16, 2024, at Westfield High School.

Secretary Tutwiler also shared the post-election sentiments of Governor Healey, stating that, irrespective of who anyone voted for, everyone has a role to play in building the kind of

community and the kind of state that we want Massachusetts to be - namely, by staying true to what we care about and by amplifying and taking care of the things that we value - especially education. Secretary Tutwiler shared that the Commonwealth remains deeply committed to ensuring that every student, regardless of circumstance or background, receives an excellent education. The Commonwealth will continue to make progress toward realizing an education system that is affordable, accessible, and truly delivers a high-quality and high-relevance experience.

C. Reports from Presidents

State University Segmental Report

[*For a copy of President Linda Thompson's full remarks, please see here:*](#)

Westfield State University President Linda Thompson expressed appreciation toward the Board on behalf of the State Universities' Council of Presidents (COP). President Thompson mentioned that the COP held an in-person business meeting in November at the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts (MCLA). During its business meeting at MCLA, the COP established top priorities for investment in the FY25 state budget, which includes:

- advocacy for an equitable share of the fair share revenue and surplus for the State University segment;
- release of a Higher Education Bond Bill addressing the completion of current projects and new projects as well as deferred maintenance needs;
- increased financial aid investment to continue to reduce the cost of earning a four-year degree at Massachusetts institutions;
- investment in student success initiatives so that campuses can better serve the changing demographics of students;
- unanimous segmental support of investing \$1 million in the State University internship and incentive program, an annual appropriation that successfully offers paid internships to hundreds of students through the Matching Grant Program;
- Investment in the State University's funding formula line item; and
- full funding of our collective bargaining agreements and continuation of the FY25 State University Success Program funded at \$14 million.

President Thompson acknowledged that the Department and Executive Office of Education (EOE) have both worked closely with the COP to develop a distribution formula and program guidelines. She added that the State Universities are also working with the Board and Department on modelling a co-op program pilot for four-year higher education institutions and are soliciting the Board's support behind these endeavors.

President Thompson expressed appreciation toward the Board for the unprecedented investment in public higher education and the investments included the Board's FY26 budget

recommendations, particularly with regard to investing in wraparound support services that are critical to the student retention efforts at the State Universities. She added that the COP will work with Commissioner Ortega and the Department on advocating for the inclusion of these budget priorities in Governor Healey's H1 budget recommendations

President Thompson also mentioned that Salem State University partnered with Cyber Trust Massachusetts and the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative to welcome Lieutenant Governor Kim Driscoll and others to a ribbon-cutting for its new Cyber Range in November 2024. President Thompson stated that the Cyber Range is the fourth of its kind in Massachusetts and the only one in the Commonwealth's North Shore region. Through hands-on programming in a realistic control setting, the Salem State University Cyber Range will provide cutting-edge cybersecurity training through a wide range of real-world simulations that will prepare students and professionals alike to prevent and respond to data breaches, ransomware attacks and a variety of other cyberattacks.

President Thompson continued, sharing that Bridgewater State University's Bachelor of Science in Cybersecurity launched in fall 2024 with 54 students enrolled in the program, which is four (4) times the number projected for the degree program's first year. For Fall 2025, Bridgewater State already has received 97 applications compared to 44 last year. Bridgewater State is also launching a Master's Degree program in Cybersecurity in Fall 2025 and is currently admitting students to that program. President Thompson added that these programs strengthen the State University segment's ability to educate the current and future workforce in this growing field, in addition to offering courses across a broad spectrum of academic programs.

President Thompson highlighted other similar programs with the State University segment, including: a program offered by Salem State University to partner with regional municipalities, police departments, small and large businesses, school districts, and nonprofit organizations to provide the skills and confidence necessary to navigate the ever-changing landscape of cybercrime; and a similar community collaboration between Westfield State University and local hospitals, fire departments and EMTs to Paramedic Program. These programs were developed to address a critical regional needs and demand.

Community College Segmental Report

[For a copy of President Luis Pedraja's full remarks, please see:](#)

Quinsigamond Community College President Luis Pedraja stated that the Community Colleges are grateful to the Board for their continued leadership and support. President Pedraja shared that the Community College presidents were looking forward to joining together in a week's time as presidents and trustees for a Massachusetts-specific governance leadership institute. He stated that it is an opportunity for trustees and presidents to learn together about national best practices and ways to align their goals and strategically plan for the future.

President Pedraja shared that the Community College presidents are continuing to focus on the affordability of higher education in Massachusetts, in partnership with the Board and the Department, so that all students can achieve their dreams of attaining higher education. He shared that the Community Colleges had three (3) top priorities for the upcoming year, including:

- the continuation of Free Community College, which drove a 14% enrollment increase in the fall;
- an increase in success funding that provides the support necessary for students to persist in their studies; and
- the issue of faculty and staff compensation, which has been previously and consistently mentioned to the Board as a critical component of the Community Colleges' sustainability.

President Pedraja stated that it is important to continue to fund success at levels that will ensure all eligible students receive the services that will help them persist and complete their education. He emphasized that as critical investments and wraparound supports are to student success, so too is the issue of faculty and staff compensation. President Pedraja reiterated his position that faculty and staff are dramatically underpaid, hindering the ability of the Community Colleges to recruit, attract, and retain professional educators who can support students in their learning. He emphasized that the issue of staff compensation is an urgent challenge that must be addressed for Free Community College to be successful and for students to continue to be successful themselves.

D. Report from Student Advisory Council (SAC)

BHE Student Member Niki Nguyen stated that she is a student representative on the Commission on Higher Education Quality and Affordability Task Force, also known as CHEQA. She expressed appreciation for the student support models explored in the first few meetings, such as the City University of New York's ASAP program and its adaptations to support students navigating higher education. These models are used for student success in attaining retention, such as incorporating solutions to remove financial barriers to full-time attendants, such as transportation and student parking issues. Also, the wraparound services for students to receive one-stop-shop support allow a sense of community for students to be engaged and openly express support in areas where they would like additional services.

Student Member Nguyen also informed the Board that the Student Advisory Council (SAC) had recently held its second meeting of the academic year, at which SAC members shared campus updates and various students expressed frustrations over a perceived lack of inclusivity related to institutional projects. She expressed that some institutions are utilizing unsatisfactory, overly generic methods for gathering student feedback that are not reflective of the students' voices.

Student Member Nguyen further encouraged the Board and the Department to implement stronger accountability measures for State Universities and Community Colleges to bridge the gap and reduce tensions between administration and students, while also ensuring that students are treated as stakeholders in higher education.

Student Member Nguyen also informed the Board that the council voted for two (2) student leaders from MassBay Community College and Middlesex Community College to serve their community and continue advocating for student success as part of the e-board.

She added that on Monday, November 18, 2024, the Open Educational Resources (OER) Advisory Council held its monthly meeting at Fitchburg State University, at which the OER Council's subcommittees shared their updates on the continuous DHE work on OER statewide. However, some members expressed a need for more unification among college presidents to support their faculty, especially those who took the time to adopt OER in their courses. She added that an application has been opened to receive interested students to serve on the OER Advisory Council to bridge communications between the Department, the respective campuses, and SAC.

E. Commissioner's Report

Commissioner Ortega offered brief remarks. He shared that even though the political landscape has changed, the work of the Advisory Council to Advance Representation in Education and our commitment to advancing equity remains the same. Commissioner Ortega then affirmed the Department's commitment to welcoming more students to the campus and ensuring that they have an experience of high quality that also makes them feel included as part of the institution.

The Commissioner expressed appreciation for institutional leaders, faculty and staff on campuses for their good work. He highlighted that a lot of work has been done to put in place a roadmap to navigate changes at the state level from the ACARE report to the work being done by the Commission on Higher Education Quality and Affordability (CHEQA), as well as the

budget memo presented today. Commissioner Ortega expressed excitement at the fact that the Healey Administration has made significant investments in institutions of higher education over the past couple of years. Finally, he expressed appreciation to everyone for a job well done and wished everyone well for the upcoming holiday season and the end of the semester.

VII. EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE REPORT & MOTIONS

A. Executive Committee Report

No report.

B. Motions

List of Documents Used

- BHE 25-20 Approval of Bristol Community College LOI Associate of Applied Science in Artificial Intelligence
- BHE 25-21 Approval of MSCA's Henry E. Warren Barn Project- Framingham State University
- BHE 25-22 Approval of the Board of Higher Education FY26 Budget Recommendations

Chair Gabrieli stated that two (2) of the motions were already entertained at the executive committee and the other one -the budget motion - is to be primarily addressed by the Board today.

Chair Gabrieli asked for a motion to approve BHE 25-20, *Approval of Bristol Community LOI Associate of Applied Science in Artificial Intelligence*. He stated that the motion is to approve the LOI Associate of Applied Science in Artificial Intelligence degree program at Bristol Community College. Chair Gabrieli turned to the Board for questions.

Member Allen expressed appreciation for the inclusion of "ethics" in the curriculum but, opined that that Bristol Community College should be using the framework of "safety and ethics" as that is the framework toward which the field is evolving.

Noting no further discussion, Chair Gabrieli called for a vote. On a motion duly made and seconded, BHE 25-20 was approved by members present through a roll call vote, as follows:

- Chair Chris Gabrieli – Yes
- Danielle Allen – Yes
- Mary Burns – Yes
- Harneen Chernow – Yes

- Ann Christensen – Yes
- Veronica Conforme – Yes
- Alex Cortez – Yes
- Paul Mattera – Yes
- Niki Nguyen - Yes
- Judy Pagliuca – Yes
- Christina Royal – Yes
- Secretary of Education, Tutwiler – Yes
- Bill Walczak- Yes

BHE 25-20 APPROVAL OF BRISTOL COMMUNITY COLLEGE LOI ASSOCIATE OF APPLIED SCIENCE IN ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

VOTED: The Board of Higher Education (BHE) has evaluated the LOI Associate of Applied Science in Artificial Intelligence for Bristol Community College and has determined that the program aligns with BHE criteria. Accordingly, the BHE authorizes the Commissioner to review the program proposal and to make a final determination.

Authority Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 15A, Section 9(b); AAC 18-40

Contact Richard Riccardi, Sc.D., Deputy Commissioner for Academic Affairs and Student Success

Chair Gabrieli turned to the next agenda item, a motion to approve BHE 25-21, *MSCA's Henry E. Warren Barn Project- Framingham State University*. Chair Gabrieli turned to the Board for questions.

Hearing no further discussion, Chair Gabrieli called for a vote. On a motion duly made and seconded, BHE 25-21 was approved by members present through a roll call vote, as follows:

- Chair Chris Gabrieli – Yes
- Danielle Allen – Yes
- Mary Burns – Yes
- Harneen Chernow – Yes
- Ann Christensen – Yes
- Veronica Conforme – Yes
- Alex Cortez – Yes
- Paul Mattera – Yes
- Niki Nguyen - Yes
- Judy Pagliuca – Yes

- Christina Royal – Yes
- Secretary of Education, Tutwiler – Yes
- Bill Walczak - Yes

BHE 25-21 APPROVAL OF FRAMINGHAM STATE UNIVERSITY MSCA'S HENRY E. WARREN BARN PROJECT.

VOTED The Board of Higher Education (BHE) has evaluated the MSCA's Henry E. Warren Barn project for Framingham State University and has determined that the proposal aligns with BHE criteria. Accordingly, the BHE authorizes the Commissioner to review the proposal and to make a final determination.

Authority Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 69, Section 30 et seq.

Contact Cynthia Farr Brown, Ph.D., Associate Commissioner of Regulatory and Veterans Affairs

Chair Gabrieli turned to the next agenda item, a motion to approve BHE 25-22, *Board of Higher Education FY26 Budget Recommendations*. Chair Gabrieli turned to the Board for questions.

Commissioner Ortega encouraged Board members to pay attention to the fact that the emphasis of the split of funds in the proposal is in percentages and not the actual amount. Member Chernow encouraged the Board to look into how the difference in the actual collection of \$2.2 billion from the budgeted \$1.3 billion can be utilized as a lot of negotiation is already going on regarding how it will be utilized.

Commissioner Ortega encouraged that resources should be invested in such a way that will magnify the impact on students and institutions, while also allowing the Board to put as much effort toward ensuring student success as it has put achieving toward affordability. Commissioner Ortega added that the Board's priorities reflect feedback and input received from Board members and institutions of higher education. He encouraged the Board to endorse these priorities during the upcoming retreat.

Hearing no further discussion, Chair Gabrieli called for a vote. On a motion duly made and seconded, BHE 25-22 was approved by members present through a roll call vote, as follows:

- Chair Chris Gabrieli – Yes

- Danielle Allen – Yes
- Mary Burns – Yes
- Harneen Chernow – Yes
- Ann Christensen – Yes
- Veronica Conforme – Yes
- Alex Cortez – Yes
- Paul Mattera – Yes
- Niki Nguyen - Yes
- Judy Pagliuca – Yes
- Christina Royal – Yes
- Secretary of Education, Tutwiler – Yes
- Bill Walczak-Yes

**BHE 25-22 APPROVAL OF THE BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION FY26 BUDGET
RECOMMENDATIONS**

VOTED The Board of Higher Education (BHE) has evaluated the Higher Education FY26 Budget Recommendations and has determined that the budget aligns with BHE criteria. Accordingly, the BHE authorizes the Commissioner to review the budget and make a final determination.

Authority Chapter 41, Section 108L (as amended).

Contact Richard Riccardi, Sc.D., Deputy Commissioner for
Academic Affairs & Student Success

Regarding the final motion listed on the agenda (BHE 25-23) Chair Gabrieli stated while they anticipated bringing forward a motion that would authorize the Commissioner to seek, accept and administer grants and gifts the motion will not be going forward at this time. Chair Gabrieli indicated that this motion is being tabled for now, but that he intends to bring the motion forward during a future Board meeting. He stated that there is a growing interest and opportunity to tap into philanthropy and other sources to support elements of the broader agenda. The forthcoming motion would be an administrative step to enable the Commissioner to advance these discussions.

VIII. ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 11:59 p.m.

*Respectfully Submitted,
Noe Ortega, Ph.D.*

Commissioner and Secretary to the Board