

**MASSACHUSETTS BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION  
BOARD RETREAT**

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September 16, 2024  
9:00 a.m.  
In-Person

**Meeting Minutes**

A retreat of the Board of Higher Education (BHE or Board) was held on Monday, September 16, 2024, in-person at Two Center Plaza, Suite 200, Boston, MA.

The following Board Members were present:

Chris Gabrieli, Chair  
Danielle Allen  
Harneen Chernow  
Ann Christensen  
Alex Cortez  
Paul Mattera  
Niki Nguyen, Voting Student Member, UMass Segment  
Christina Royal  
Patrick Tutwiler, Secretary of Education  
Bill Walczak  
Thalles De Souza, non-voting Student Advisor, Community College segment

Noe Ortega, Commissioner and Secretary to the Board

The following Board Members or Advisors were absent:

Mary Burns  
Veronica Conforme  
Judy Pagliuca  
Imani Barbour, non-voting Student Advisor, State University segment

**I. CALL TO ORDER**

Board Chair Chris Gabrieli called the meeting to order at 9:13 a.m. Chair Gabrieli welcomed members and set the context for the meeting. He stated that this retreat represented a continuation of the Board's priority-setting work, with the goal of aligning the Board's focused,

strategic priorities with the Department of Higher Education's (DHE's) priorities in a unified way across innovation, financial aid, and socioeconomic mobility. He anticipated being in a position to bring forward strategic priority plans for formal Board approval in January 2025.

Chair Gabrieli noted that there were several "new faces" in the room. He introduced Megan Galbreath, a Policy Fellow for DHE, who helped prepare materials for today's discussion, and Nicole Johnson, DHE Director of Educational Equity & Justice, who is joining the Office of the Commissioner and will be providing BHE support. He also spotlighted two new student members of BHE's Student Advisory Council (SAC) who were elected to BHE positions: Niki Nguyen, SAC Chair and BHE voting student member from the UMass segment; and Thalles De Souza, student segmental advisor from the Community Colleges segment.

## **II. OVERVIEW OF STRATEGIC PRIORITIES PLAN**

*List of documents used:*

[Strategic Priorities Plan PowerPoint Presentation, September 2025](#)

The Board was reminded that they received the first draft of the proposed strategic priorities at the January 2025 Board Retreat. Feedback was received from Board members, and it was determined that more time and capacity was needed to help develop the concepts. As a result, two senior policy fellows were recruited-- Carey Davis and Megan Galbreath-- to support the development of the Board's strategic priorities plan. Chair Gabrieli noted that Davis would have a focus on the Innovation Priority Plan and Galbreath would work on the Financial Aid and Socioeconomic Mobility Priority Plans, which builds upon the BHE advisory councils' ongoing work. Chair Gabrieli stated that the Strategic Priorities Plan is an action-oriented approach to a handful of top priorities toward which BHE and DHE will remain in disciplined pursuit.

Chair Gabrieli shared that today's retreat would focus on financial aid, socioeconomic mobility, and innovation priorities. He noted that the Board's equity-minded goal of reducing socioeconomic disparities in higher education "by at least half" underlies each of these overarching priorities. Commissioner Ortega noted that the DHE had been reviewing Advisory Council work, engaging fellows, and building the analytic and planning based for all three strategic priority areas. The Commissioner emphasized that the BHE's equity goal remains foundational and woven throughout all strategic priorities.

Board Member Paul Mattera inquired about the "starting point" for disparities and whether they are adequately captured by the DHE's current metrics. Commissioner Ortega responded that baseline data exists and will be integrated into final plans.

Board Member Cortez stated that while college-going and success data are clear, mobility measures require further development.

Chair Gabrieli noted that the prioritization of financial aid emerged because of its centrality to equity and access, and he emphasized the importance of grounding the strategic priorities in measurable, narrative-driven plans.

### **III. INNOVATION PRIORITY**

Carey Davis, DHE senior policy fellow, presented the Innovation Priority framework. She stated that the BHE and DHE will incubate and promote innovation at the system-level and with cohorts of multiple IHEs. Davis described BHE's core role in this work as launching initial pilots and measuring impact, building coalitions of the willing interested in piloting new approaches, setting policy conditions, and allocating resources. Davis noted that BHE is well-suited for such work because of its mission and ability to coordinate work across segments.

Davis cited the success of BHE's past innovation-related initiatives, such as Early College, Open Educational Resources (OER), and Developmental Education Reform. By way of example, with Early College, BHE/DHE identified an innovate approach with potential to address system needs and set policy conditions for interested individual institutions to participate in scaling Early College.

Davis stated that the Board's draft Innovation Priority proposal was crafted through a combination of stakeholder engagement, external expert interviews, and supplemental sources. Davis explained that this feedback resulted in recommendations to 1) build an innovation unit within DHE, 2) structure the innovation unit to operate freely with campuses and DHE staff under the Commissioner's supervision, and 3) provide campuses with clarity on their own participatory role in the innovation process. Davis stated that the proposed innovation unit would lead and execute a regular cycle of piloting, evaluation, and action.

Davis then discussed the following "guiding principles" for the staffing and execution of the innovation priority:

- Dedicated capacity – create a focused innovation unit equipped with resources to execute on the priority and dedicated, lean team with innovation expertise.
- System-focused – focus on innovation at the systems level that has the potential address shared priorities and challenges across campuses.
- Pilot and evaluate – incubate promising approaches by piloting with interested campus; make decisions to discontinue, adjust, or scale based on ongoing evaluation.
- Enhance impact through technology – prioritize technology solutions with potential to meet learner and campus needs more effectively.
- Enabling policy and resources – establish enabling conditions for innovations through policy and sustainable resources.

Davis stated that the innovation unit will use "seed funding" to advance proposals generated externally by the campuses and internally by unit members, themselves, that follow these guiding principles. In turn, innovation unit staff will evaluate the results of pilot programs and

recommend policy changes to enable scaling.

Davis explained that BHE's innovation efforts will initially focus on key periods during a learner's lifespan, such as Postsecondary Awareness and Planning (Grade 12) and Admissions, Affordability, and Success (College), in recognition of the fact that interventions to reduce racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic disparities in higher education must be made in advance of matriculation. System level innovation has the potential to accelerate improvements in admissions, affordability, and learner success. The BHE/DHE will utilize innovation to identify new approaches to support learners from college graduation to initial employment, reducing under-employment and promoting socioeconomic mobility.

Davis noted that a successful and sustainable innovation function requires new structures, expertise, and resources. In addition to the creation of a new "Innovation Unit" within DHE, Davis also mentioned the creation of a BHE "innovation-specific" task force, which would be comprised of external experts and BHE members focused on providing input on innovation strategy and execution.

Davis stated that BHE's "Five-Year Goals" for a productive innovation function include:

- demonstrating an ability to launch innovations that contribute to overall equity and success goals for learners
- launching and sustaining a dedicated innovation function unit with the ability to respond quickly and nimbly ;
- attracting and growing multi-year funding from both public and philanthropic sources;
- launching at least 10 pilots that have the potential to make a meaningful impact on BHE strategic priorities if scaled;
- demonstrating positive outcomes and then substantially scaling at least two (2) pilots to reach a much broader group of learners ; and
- growing a network of partners on campuses, at non-profits, and throughout academia.

Davis then stated that the Board's "18 Month" goals include action items that are currently in progress such as attracting sufficient public and/or private resources to launch DHE's Innovation Unit; recruiting a small yet effective team to lead and execute innovation work; and identifying and refining at least two promising potential pilots that both align with BHE's strategic priority goals and build on promising innovations and practices from across the country; forming and convening a BHE Innovation Task Force composed of BHE members, external experts, and civic leaders; and working with campuses to identify and refine at least two promising campus-identified and collaborative pilots with multiple campus partners.

Commissioner Ortega emphasized the need for system-level innovation, while recognizing that Massachusetts would be the first state to establish a dedicated innovation function inside a higher education agency.

Board Member Conforme raised questions about data capacity and the need for clarity on innovation metrics.

Board Member Ann Christensen noted that while OER reduced costs for students, it has not transformed the underlying higher ed financing model.

Board Member Cortez stressed the importance of clearly defining innovation and establishing measurable success criteria to avoid dilution of impact.

Board Member Walczak urged expanding collaboration beyond campus-to-campus, especially regarding workforce alignment.

Board Member Chernow expressed concerns about balancing a new, dedicated innovation unit versus internal team capacity building.

Secretary Tutwiler expressed optimism that the 18-month goals felt achievable.

Student Advisor De Souza stressed the need to restore the “student voice” to institutional structures following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Commissioner Ortega shared that piloting would be essential, but launching ten pilots simultaneously may be counterproductive without having strong foundations. He said focusing on evaluation and learning, including from failed pilots, would be key.

#### **IV. FINANCIAL AID & SOCIOECONOMIC MOBILITY PRIORITIES**

Next, Megan Galbreath gave a presentation on the developing Financial Aid and Socioeconomic Mobility priority and frameworks. She recognized that financial aid and socioeconomic mobility have been top priorities for the BHE for years and as such, much of this work builds upon existing precursors. S

Galbreath also recognized the current, ongoing work of the Commission on Higher Education Quality & Affordability (CHEQA). She noted that CHEQA is charged with making recommendations related improving quality and affordability of higher education in the Commonwealth. Galbreath explained that CHEQA’s work was shaped in part by DHE’s Strategic Higher Education Finance (SHEF) initiative and their goals to make college more accessible and affordable for students; increasing institution funding to support student success; ensuring system-level ability to foster innovation and collaboration; aligning incentives on cost sharing between the state and campuses; and increasing transparency and predictability. Galbreath

noted that the Commonwealth has doubled state financial aid investments since December 2022.

It was proposed that three principles guide the Strategic Priority Plan for Financial Aid & Student Success:

- Mass Higher Ed Financial Resign,
- Student Success Initiatives, and
- Guidance and Clarity on Cost of Attendance.

#### *Financial Aid Discussion*

Student Advisor De Souza emphasized that financial aid systems are unclear and burdensome.

Board Member Chernow questioned whether new investments (e.g., Free Community College) primarily benefit those who would have qualified anyway.

Board Member Conforme highlighted the importance of addressing middle-class affordability. Members agreed communication about aid is insufficient.

#### *Socioeconomic Mobility Discussion*

Galbreath shared that the two key principles to guide the Board's work on socioeconomic mobility would be determining measures and policy levers. In particular it will be important to decide what specific measures of economic mobility and return on investment (ROI) to track, and determine the methodology. In addition, she said that communication was key, noting that it was important to determine how to share these measures with key stakeholders. Policy levers would include program approval and review, campus strategic planning, and work-based learning to name a few.

Board Member Mattera raised concerns that mobility-based data could create institutional discomfort and raise governance tension.

Board Member Royal stressed building flexibility into pathways and avoiding early over-specialization.

Board Member Christensen emphasized consumer transparency without forcing reductive notions of success.

Board Member Walczak noted gaps in community-level data, especially for low-income communities.

Board Member Cortez cautioned against a ROI-only framing that could exacerbate inequity.

## **V. BOARD STRUCTURE & ALIGNMENT**

Chair Gabrieli led a discussion on proposed evolution of Board governance structures. He noted that until relatively recently, the Board was supported by standing Committees with broad mandates, and the occasional Task Force, as well as the statutorily-required Executive Committee. Membership was limited to BHE members, and efforts were at time duplicative without the desired pay off. He noted that the current structure of Advisory Councils, which the Board started using in the Fall of 2021 had broad mandates but lacked delegated authority, and had mixed success. He noted that during the January 2024 Board Retreat the Board discussed the strengths and weaknesses of our current structure and sought to reflect on how we could more effectively and efficiently function, strategize and carry out our mission. Today's agenda item was a continuation of that discussion, with no proposed vote.

Chair Gabrieli shared that past ad hoc Task Forces (e.g., THESIS, Campus Safety and Violence Prevention) have produced strong results and may be a better structural model. Chair Gabrieli proposed transitioning to four Task Forces, mapped to the emerging strategic priorities:

- Financial Aid
- Socioeconomic Mobility
- Innovation
- Public Good

Chair Gabrieli noted that the Executive Committee continues to serve a strong fiduciary function and fulfills statutory requirements.

Board Member Mattera expressed his support for structures that bring substantive policy debate back to the Board.

Board Member Cortez emphasized avoiding performative meetings and focusing Task Forces on effective and actionable policy work.

Board Member Walczak noted the importance of having clear charges for the anticipated Task Forces.

Chair Gabrieli stressed the need for strategic, non-performative structures and committed to considering Board Member input received in designing and implementing strategies on board structure and governance as they move forward.

## **VI. ADJOURNMENT**

The meeting was adjourned at 12:59 p.m.

*Respectfully Submitted,  
Noe Ortega, Ph.D.  
Commissioner and Secretary to the Board*