

MASSACHUSETTS BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

January 29, 2025
9:00 a.m.
Hybrid

Meeting Minutes

A retreat of the Board of Higher Education (BHE or Board) was held on Wednesday, January 29, 2025, both in-person on the 21st Floor at One Ashburton Place, Boston, MA, and remotely via teleconference (Zoom).

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 ¹
Christina Royal²
Patrick Tutwiler, Secretary of Education
Bill Walczak
Thalles De Souza, non-voting Student Advisor, Community College segment³

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 AND WELCOMING REMARKS

Board Chair Chris Gabrieli called the meeting to order at 9:15 a.m. He reviewed the agenda and the goals for the meeting, noting that the main items on the agenda are to review and approve the proposed, four strategic priorities of the Board, followed by a discussion on Board governance and structure. The Board will also hear from the Department on key equity goal measures, noting that the strategic priorities work is in service to our overall equity goal. He

¹ Arrived at 9:46am

² Participated remotely, via Zoom

³ Arrived at 9:46am

stated that there are several motions to be taken up, including four motions related to Board governance and structure, and one related to the strategic priorities discussion. He stated that the Board will take up the strategic priorities motion first, followed by the Board governance motions.

II. BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

List of Documents used

[PowerPoint Presentation: Board of Higher Education Retreat, January 29, 2025](#)

[BHE 25-29](#) Approval of Board of Higher Education Strategic Priorities and Endorsement of Innovation and Economic Mobility Strategic Priorities Framework Plans

Chair Gabrieli provided background and context, via a PowerPoint presentation, for the strategic priorities discussion. He said he was excited about today's discussion as it reflects the culmination of several months of work on a fundamental and critical responsibility of the Board related to strategic planning. The goal of today's discussion is to approve focused, strategic priorities to better align and prioritize the work of the Board and Department to the needs and expectations of the students and families we serve, and the workforce and societal needs of the Commonwealth, while also helping to coordinate and support the work at the individual campus level.

As a reminder, he noted that the Board held three dedicated sessions (including today's session) to develop, discuss, and establish a focused set of four strategic priorities, then in September the Board discussed a full draft of the Innovation priority plan, as well as guiding principles for the Student Success/ Financial Aid and Economic Mobility priority plans. Since that time, a variety of stakeholders, including external advisors, were engaged to help refine our Economic Mobility priority plan, which will be discussed today.

Chair Gabrieli reviewed the overall goals for the day which were to: approve the four strategic priorities; endorse the frameworks and goals for two of the BHE's proposed strategic priorities (Innovation and Economic Mobility Strategic Priority Plans); hear from the Department on key equity goal measures; and approve governance-related proposals, including a vote on appointing a Vice Chair, and amending the Board's By Laws.

A. INNOVATION PRIORITY

Board Chair Gabrieli noted that while the Board has identified four priorities, innovation stretches across each of the other three pillars. At its September 2024 Retreat, the Board discussed its Innovation Priority Plan. Board Chair Gabrieli reviewed the PowerPoint slides on the Innovation priority, which included the guiding principles and key elements of future innovation.

He noted that as higher education faces growing pressures and evolving needs, effective innovation will be crucial.

Chair Gabrieli also acknowledged the Board's focus on and system-level change. He mentioned that many segments and institutions are doing great things and encouraged both the Board and DHE to look at the ideas and problem-solving arising from the campuses, as well as national trends, with the intention of promoting the most promising of those initiatives. He noted that Massachusetts will become a national pioneer in this realm as the only public state higher education agency to stand up a dedicated innovation function.

Senior Deputy Commissioner Jose Luis Santos continued discussing the proposed framework and the Department's plans for dedicated capacity building. He shared that there will be actual FTEs in service to both promote and scale all priorities while spending time thinking about the work. He noted that the Department was also looking at technological solutions and the prospect of creating an Innovation Hub, which would be the first of its kind at the state agency level. Staff would collaborate and consult with experts across the country and at Massachusetts institutions of higher education.

Board Member Mattera stated his opinion that institutions of higher education were being "talked down to" throughout the conversation and noted that initiatives at the campus level could help drive the Board's own work. He also noted that the Board should keep in mind that there was "a lot bubbling up" and the Board needed to be observant of what the campuses were doing.

Board Member Allen thanked the Board for holding the retreat as it was a good venue for Board members to learn and process. Member Allen stated that innovation underpins every other goal and should align with everything the Board and Department do. She also noted that the Board should consider where to deploy, prioritize, and lean on technology where possible.

Commissioner Ortega acknowledged the challenges posed by having an innovation priority, given its inherent ambiguity and the difficulty of making the case for additional funding. He acknowledged that the state often did not move fast enough for the field's needs, and the Department would implement pilot programs from which to learn and then scale. By doing so, the Department and the Board can generate its own outcomes and jump start such work at the state level.

In turn, Senior Deputy Commissioner Santos emphasized the importance of identifying and embracing institutions doing phenomenal work, rather than restricting such efforts by focusing only on one institution.

Senior Deputy Commissioner Santos discussed the Board's five-year goals for innovation, which would also contribute to the Board's goals of equity and success. He shared that the Department wanted to launch and sustain a dedicated innovation function unit. The plan is to

seek out funding and support and launch at least ten pilots that would have an impact on the Board's strategic priorities and then scale at least two pilots. There would also be an evaluation process through which the Board can measure whether the pilots demonstrate positive outcomes. Senior Deputy Commissioner Santos shared goals for the next 18 months, which included forming a BHE Innovation Task Force, attracting resources to make the innovation unit sustainable for the year, and recruiting people to execute innovation-related work. He also indicated that the Education Strategy Group (ESG) would provide informal support for this work. Senior Deputy Commissioner Santos then introduced Michael Deuser from the Education Strategy Group and Megan Galbreath, who joined the retreat via Zoom to answer any questions.

Member Mattera asked where the data relevant to the current conversation came from and what was the value of the data. He noted struggles at the campus level to report student earning data over longer periods of time. Associate Commissioner for Research & Planning Mario Delci shared that the Department had earning data.

Commissioner Ortega noted that Department staff are heeding the Board's observations, and that the Department should account for the foundation that is in place for mobility-based discussions.

B. ECONOMIC MOBILITY PRIORITY

Hearing no further questions, Chair Gabrieli turned to the Economic Mobility Priority and invited Deputy Commissioner Policy Michael Dannenberg to present. Deputy Commissioner Dannenberg provided a PowerPoint presentation that highlighted suggested principles as well as 18 month and 5-year goals to guide work on the Board's Economic Mobility priority. He discussed prior action by the Board and DHE on economic mobility and noted work done in other states, including Connecticut and North Carolina, on reporting of student post-graduation earning outcomes. He urged the Board to consider investments in skills-based training and work-based learning as means to heighten post-graduation earnings. He mentioned the plan to invest in the concept of pilot programming in each of those areas. According to Deputy Commissioner Dannenberg, data shows that completion alone is an insufficient metric to ensure a high return on investment (ROI) for individuals and the Commonwealth.

Chair Gabrieli referenced the Board's 18-month goals for this priority, which included forming the BHE Economic Mobility Task Force, launching a policy gap analysis to identify opportunities for alignment with the state's goal, and beginning to report on at least one additional economic success measures.

Member Mattera asked if there was a way to reverse engineer the data so that campuses, themselves, could judge whether they are "teaching students the right things."

Deputy Commissioner Dannenberg acknowledged that this is feasible, and the Department would have to determine what data to look at and who the audience would consist of.

Chair Gabrieli noted that we first need to generate some data and that campuses would be very interested in seeing this data. He also highlighted that the Board would not participate in a top-down decision-making process.

Board Member Cortez shared that money was not everything, but that money was one driving factor. He emphasized the need to audit currently available data and their connection with this work. Board Member Cortez acknowledged that the information would not be perfect, but it would be important to get decisions out quickly so the BHE and DHE could have direction, acknowledge the data's limitations, and directly address their audience. He also mentioned that there was no common language on skills, and that the focus should be on earnings rather than return on investment (ROI).

Board Member Christensen emphasized the importance of leading with the Board's definitions for these terms and thinking about how to communicate out the ROI of attending college, while offering guidance and data.

Board Member Walczak noted that while there are all sorts of programs and new initiatives in the healthcare field, there is a dearth of data from low-income communities. He urged the Board to think about the importance of being involved in these continued conversations.

Board Member Allen raised the importance of empowering individuals to build rewarding lives but clarified that doing so was just "part of the whole picture" and would need to be supported with other factors such as effective research partnerships.

Board Member Chernow shared that economic mobility was a key factor and that different individuals may seek different outcomes.

Board Member Royal acknowledged how circumstances have changed since she and her fellow Board Members graduated, when students were not necessarily focused on pursuing a specific profession, as they are now. Board Member Royal posited that this transformed student mindset should factor into how educators prepare students for college. She noted dissonance between students' mindset and Commonwealth's approach to students and reiterated that the Board should think about how to support innovation at the campus level.

Board Member Nguyen advocated for additional explanation of earnings-based realities, as well as still focusing on the resources offered to non-traditional students while also maintaining holistic programs.

Student Advisory Council (SAC) Segmental Advisor Thalles DeSouza remarked that students are not always involved in ROI-related conversations, and that access to such conversations and related data would help students make more informed decisions.

Board Member Cortez emphasized that 42% of students do not make back what they paid for college and scrutinized the ROI of certain degrees.

Chair Gabrieli wrapped up the discussion noting that later in the meeting the Board will vote on guiding principles and goals for the Economic Mobility priority, including 5-year goals and 18-month goals.

C. STUDENT SUCCESS AND FINANCIAL AID

Chair Gabrieli provided introductory context on the Student Success and Financial Aid priority. An overview of the upcoming work of the Commission on Higher Education Quality & Affordability (CHEQA) was provided. The Commission's intended study areas include student success, state financial aid redesign, and faculty recruitment and retention. CHEQA will also review and evaluate such areas as state financial assistance programs and funding, student costs and debts, programs that improve student success, financial assistance program design, and improvements needed to increase the recruitment and retention of qualified adjunct and full-time faculty and staff. Chair Gabrieli noted that the work of CHEQA closely aligns with the Board's student success and financial aid strategic priority guiding principles. Accordingly, the plan is to wait for the final report and recommendations from CHEQA before a potential vote on the finalization of the frameworks and goals for this strategic priority plan.

D. PUBLIC GOOD PRIORITY

Chair Gabrieli then pivoted to a discussion of the Board's "public good" priority and asked the Commissioner to initiate this discussion. Board Member Allen suggested baseline assessments of Massachusetts's standing on a public good goal should include "qualitative" as well as "quantitative" assessments.

Commissioner Ortega shared that most of the Department's interactions with the Board take place in a structured agenda environment and noted that the retreat provides an opportunity to "think out loud" in a more casual and broader forum. He opined that the "social" aspect should be emphasized in discussions surrounding socio-economic mobility and further noted that serving the public good requires careful thought paid to outcomes and societal benefits. The Commissioner shared the proposed timeline for the public good priority, which included analysis and research in the first three quarters of 2025, followed by plan development in the last quarter of 2025, and a potential vote and/or Board discussion in early-to-mid 2026.

E. EQUITY GOAL

Hearing no further questions, Chair Gabrieli turned the discussion to equity, noting that all four strategic priorities are in service to the BHE's Equity Goal. Assistant Commissioner for Analytics & Digital Services Sarah Mealey presented to the Board on key metrics regarding the Board's

"Equity Goal." She summarized the overall trends and disparities between racial/ethnic and socioeconomic subgroups in the areas of matriculation, completion and post-enrollment earnings. She reminded the Board that it has already set a universal target for college completion, that all subgroups should experience at least a 60% completion rate at the system level by 2033. She also shared a model for an intermediate target of a 50% reduction in disparities with respect to the 60% target across subgroups. She then shared a model for a universal target, with a similar intermediate target, for college matriculation, should the Board wish to set a target for this area, a process that would entail collaboration with BESE/DESE. The models showed that, in the case of both metrics, even meeting the intermediate targets for some subgroups would be a substantial lift, particularly for Black, Hispanic or Latino, and Pell Recipient students.

Board Member Chernow referenced and expressed concerns about the federal government's increasing hostility toward diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives and programs. Commissioner Ortega responded that the Board and Department would have to consider the implications of these changing circumstances and what access actually means to Massachusetts.

Board Member Allen shared that "excellence for all" did not require further definition, and that the Board would have to work harder to achieve a universal standard of excellence.

Megan Galbreath, Senior Policy Fellow, then discussed targeted strategies that may lead to improved outcomes for the populations with the largest disparities. She shared that Massachusetts Early College programs have shown an approximate 14 percentage point increase in matriculation rates among Early College students compared to similarly situated peers. She then showed a scenario in which Early College is expanded to serving 20% of 12th graders (up from the present 3%), specifically serving 40% of Black and Hispanic 12th graders and 10% of 12th graders of other races/ethnicities. If the same 14 percentage point gain in matriculation were observed among the larger participating group in the scenario, the disparities in matriculation rates would be reduced by 5 percentage points, or approximately 20%.

F. BOARD MOTION ON STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

Board Chair Gabrieli turned the Board's attention to the motion in their Board packet, *BHE 25-29 Approval of Board of Higher Education Strategic Priorities and Endorsement of Innovation and Economic Mobility Strategic Priorities*. He thanked the Board for their thoughtful engagement, discussion, and questions, and directed their attention to the text of the cover motion and the background statement.

Hearing no further discussion, Chair Gabrieli called for a vote. On a motion duly made and seconded, BHE 25-29 was unanimously approved by all members present through a roll call vote, as follows:

- Chair Chris Gabrieli – Yes
- Danielle Allen – Yes
- Harneen Chernow – Yes
- Ann Christensen – Yes
- Alex Cortez – Yes
- Paul Mattera – Yes
- Niki Nguyen - Yes
- Christina Royal – Yes
- Bill Walczak – Yes

BHE 25-29 Approval of Board of Higher Education Strategic Priorities and Endorsement of Innovation and Economic Mobility Strategic Priorities Framework Plans

VOTED The Board of Higher Education (BHE) acknowledges the research, analyses, and summary policy proposals presented during its January 18, 2024, September 16, 2024, and January 29, 2025, retreats in development of BHE Strategic Priorities.

The Board approves the following four Strategic Priorities in service of our overall Equity Goal:

- *Student Success and Financial Aid- Supporting and advancing student access and success through well-designed, sufficiently funded, clear and consistent financial aid and success program funding.*
- *Economic Mobility- Increasing the Economic Mobility Benefits of Postsecondary Participation.*
- *Public Good- Improving Alignment Between Public Good Outcomes and Postsecondary Higher Education Opportunities.*
- *Innovation- Facilitating and Fostering High-Impact Innovation Throughout the Public Higher Education System.*

The Commissioner shall periodically report back to the BHE. Said reports shall include any refinements or enhancements to the implementation frameworks.

Authority M.G.L. c. 15A, §1, 6 and 9

Contact Noe Ortega, Commissioner

III. BOARD GOVERNANCE AND STRUCTURE

List of Documents Used

- [BHE 25-26](#) Rescission BHE Motion 22-03 (Establishment of Board of Higher Education Advisory Councils)
- [BHE 25-27](#) Amendments to Board of Higher Education By-Laws
- [BHE 25-28](#) Approval of Vice Chair Appointment

Chair Gabrieli turned to the next agenda item, a discussion of Board governance and structure. He stated that he is proposing a series of motions related to changes to the way the Board currently operates, and he offered PowerPoint slides to set background and context. He noted that the BHE is currently supported by an Executive Committee, Advisory Councils, and ad hoc Task Forces. He proposed sunsetting the Advisory Councils in favor of appointing four Task Forces aligned to the Strategic Priorities plan that was just approved. The four Task Forces would be: Financial Aid; Economic Mobility: Public Good; and Innovation. The membership of these Task Forces would be comprised of Board members and non-Board members.

The envisioned Task Forces will be multi-year efforts tied to individual strategic priorities. They will meet on an ad hoc basis and will consider, advise, and make strategy and policy recommendations to the BHE—with no authority to act alone. In addition, he is proposing that Board Member Harneen Chernow should serve as Vice Chair and noted that there is a motion in the Board packet which seeks to effectuate that appointment.

Chief Legal Counsel Dena Papanikolaou reviewed statutory requirements and the current By Law requirements. She confirmed that Vice Chair appointments are subject to Board approval. Regarding the governance changes, Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou noted that to effectuate Chair Gabrieli's proposed change two motions were needed: one motion to sunset the Advisory Councils established by the BHE in September 2021; and another motion to amend the section of the By Laws which refers to the intended composition of the Executive Committee. On the latter, the By Laws currently provide that the Executive Committee will be comprised of the Chairperson, the Vice-Chairperson and "at least two other members who also serve as chairs of committees or advisory councils." If the BHE decides not to use Committees or Advisory Councils, that language should be edited to simply state that the Executive Committee will be comprised of the Chairperson, the Vice-Chairperson and "at least two other Board members."

Hearing no further discussion, Chair Gabrieli called for a vote. On a motion duly made and seconded, *BHE 25-26, Rescission of BHE Motion 22-03 (Establishment of Board of Higher Education Advisory Councils)* was unanimously approved by all members present through a roll call vote, as follows:

- Chair Chris Gabrieli – Yes
- Danielle Allen – Yes
- Harneen Chernow – Yes
- Ann Christensen – Yes

- Alex Cortez – Yes
- Paul Mattera – Yes
- Niki Nguyen - Yes
- Christina Royal – Yes
- Bill Walczak – Yes

BHE 25-26 Rescission of FY22 Advisory Councils and Endorsement of Task Force Approach

VOTED The Board of Higher Education hereby rescinds BHE Motion 22-03 (September 22, 2021) which established the charges and membership of the following four Advisory Councils:

- Finance and Administrative Policy (FAAP)
- Academic Affairs and Student Success (AA&SS)
- Strategic Planning
- Evidence Based Policy Making (EBPM)

The Board further approves the use of an *ad hoc* Task Force approach, as needed, to advise the Board on matters within the jurisdiction of the Board; provided that said *ad hoc* Task Forces shall be established consistent with Article III, Section 3 of the By-Laws, and as provided in the attached Background Statement.

Authority Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 15A, Section 4; BHE By-Laws Article I, Section 3 and Article III. (as amended by BHE 21-49); [BHE Motion 23-03 \(September 22, 2021\)](#).

Contact Constantia T. Papanikolaou, Chief Legal Counsel

Chair Gabrieli introduced the next motion, BHE 25-27, *Amendments to Board of Higher Education By-Laws*. Chair Gabrieli shared the Board's commitment to periodically reviewing its bylaws and noted how this motion reflects the previous motion's transition to an ad hoc Task Force approach in lieu of an Advisory Council or Committee sub-body structure.

Hearing no further discussion, Chair Gabrieli called for a vote. On a motion duly made and seconded, *BHE Motion 25-27 Amendments to Board of Higher Education By-Laws* was approved unanimously by all members present through a roll call vote, as follows:

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

- Ann Christensen – Yes
- Alex Cortez – Yes
- Paul Mattera – Yes
- Niki Nguyen – Yes
- Christina Royal – Yes
- Bill Walczak – Yes

BHE 25-27 Amendments to Board of Higher Education By-Laws

VOTED The Board of Higher Education hereby approves amendments to its Bylaws, as set forth in Attachment A, and subject to the Board of Higher Education committing to conducting at least a mid-year review of the By-Law implementation in year one.

Authority Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 15A, Section 4; BHE By-Laws Article IV, Section 1 (Amendment or Revision).

Contact Constantia T. Papanikolaou, Chief Legal Counsel

Chair Gabrieli continued the next and final motion, BHE 25-28, *Approval of Vice Chair Appointment*. Chair Gabrieli stated that he wanted to recommend Board Member Chernow to serve as the BHE Vice-Chair. The Vice-Chair would lead during any instance of the Chair's absence and would also offer leadership and guidance to the Board. Chair Gabrieli thanked member Chernow for agreeing to serve in this capacity.

Hearing no further discussion, Chair Gabrieli called for a vote. On a motion duly made and seconded, *BHE 25-28 Approval of Vice-Chair Appointment* was unanimously approved by all members present through a roll call vote, as follows:

- Chair Chris Gabrieli – Yes
- Danielle Allen – Yes
- Ann Christensen – Yes
- Alex Cortez – Yes
- Paul Mattera – Yes
- Niki Nguyen – Yes
- Christina Royal – Yes
- Bill Walczak – Yes

BHE 25-28 Approval of Vice Chair Appointment

VOTED The Board of Higher Education (BHE) Bylaws require the BHE to annually

review and renew the appointment of the BHE's Vice-Chair.

For the remainder of Fiscal Year 2025 (AY2024-2025) and for Fiscal Year 2026 (AY2025-2026) the BHE approves the appointment of Harneen Chernow as BHE Vice-Chair.

Authority Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 15A, Section 4; BHE By-Laws Article I, Section 3(d) and Article III, Section 2 (as amended, June 22, 2021).

Contact Constantia T. Papanikolaou, Chief Legal Counsel

Chair Gabrieli concluded by sharing that the Board had participated in two retreats in one year, and that would be the anticipated plan moving forward. He thanked the Board for their participation and engagement and noted that the next (regularly scheduled) Board meeting would be February 25th.

VII. ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 12:57 p.m.

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