

MASSACHUSETTS BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

February 18, 2025

2:30 p.m.

Via Zoom

Meeting Minutes

A meeting of the Board of Higher Education (BHE or Board) was held on Tuesday, February 18, 2025, remotely via teleconference (Zoom).

The following Board Members were present:

Chris Gabrieli, Chair

Harneen Chernow, Vice Chair

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Alex Cortez

Bob LePage, Secretary of Education Designee

Paul Mattera

Niki Nguyen, Voting Student Member, State University Segment

Judy Pagliuca

Christina Royal

Bill Walczak

Noe Ortega, Commissioner and Secretary to the Board

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

The following Board Members or Advisors were absent:

Danielle Allen

Veronica Conforme

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

I. CALL TO ORDER

¹ Arrived at 2:57 pm, after roll call attendance was taken.

Board Chair Chris Gabrieli called the meeting to order at 2:26 p.m. Roll call attendance was taken (see above for attendance roster).

Chair Gabrieli noted that this Special Meeting was scheduled to vote on motions that would typically be presented at an Executive Committee meeting. However, the Executive Committee is currently under reconstruction and lacks a fully appointed members. Chair Gabrieli noted that there are three motions on the agenda, and they will conclude the meeting with a brief discussion on the Commissioner's annual performance evaluation.

Before turning to the agenda items, Chair Gabrieli briefly address the recent, February 14, 2025 "Dear Colleague" letter from the U.S. Department of Education, which introduces new complexities for the Board and post-secondary educational institutions. He assured Board members that the Department is actively engaging and seeking guidance from key authorities in Massachusetts, including the Attorney General's Office, to determine appropriate responses and support for campuses navigating these changes.

II. ACCEPTANCE OF MINUTES

None

III. MOTIONS

[BHE 25-30](#) Approval of Greenfield Community College LOI Associate of Applied Science in Surgical Technology

[BHE 25-31](#) Approval of Early Childhood Educator Loan Repayment Program Guidelines
a) [Attachment A](#)

[BHE 25-32](#) Approval of Massachusetts State College Building Authority Fiscal Year 2026 Rent Schedule and Operating Budget
a) [Attachment A](#)
b) [Attachment B](#)

Chair Gabrieli introduced BHE Motion 25-30, *Approval of Greenfield Community College LOI*

Associate of Applied Science in Surgical Technology. Chair Gabrieli welcomed representatives from Greenfield Community College, who introduced themselves as Dr. April Parsons (Vice President of Academic Affairs), Dawn Josefski (Associate Dean of Allied Health Programs), and Nicole Turner (Program Coordinator), who were present to discuss Greenfield Community College's proposed degree program in further detail.

Vice Chair Chernow expressed support for the proposed degree program, considering the regional demand for employees in the field of surgical technology as well as barriers to enrollment posed by the increased shift from certificate to degree programs in the field, overall. Chair Gabrieli commended the Greenfield team for their proactive approach, noting the urgency of addressing workforce shortages in healthcare settings, particularly in relation to local hospitals. He acknowledged their efforts in planning clinical experiences and hiring staff ahead of the program launch.

Chair Gabrieli raised a question regarding potential connections between the proposed degree program and existing dual enrollment or early college initiatives and the critical need for skilled professionals in healthcare, emphasizing the program's potential to facilitate pathways to stable, middle-class careers for students while addressing current workforce shortages. Vice President Dawn Josefski highlighted the program's close partnership with Franklin Tech Community College, which itself offers a health occupations program, as well as Greenfield Community College's own plan to initiate a workforce development program in sterile processing as a potential entry point for students interested in advancing to surgical technology. This approach aims to accommodate varying student interests and readiness while building a structured career pathway. She confirmed that their initial focus is on establishing the associate's degree program, with plans to incorporate smaller certificate programs in the future to further enhance workforce development.

Chair Gabrieli praised the thoughtful design of the program, noting its focus on "permeability," which allows students to navigate different educational and career options without assuming undue risk. He also commended the proposal's outline for clear sequencing of courses and alternative pathways.

In the absence of any further discussion, Chair Gabrieli called for a vote. On a motion duly made and seconded, BHE 25-30 was approved by all members present through a roll call vote, as follows:

- Chris Gabrieli, Chair - Yes
- Mary Burns - Yes
- Harneen Chernow - Yes
- Ann Christensen - Yes
- Alex Cortez - Yes
- Bob LePage - Yes
- Paul Mattera - Yes

- Niki Nguyen - Yes
- Judy Pagliuca - Yes
- Christina Royal - Yes
- Bill Walczak – Yes

**BHE 25-30 APPROVAL OF GREENFIELD COMMUNITY COLLEGE LOI
ASSOCIATE OF APPLIED SCIENCE IN SURGICAL TECHNOLOGY**

Chair

VOTED The Board of Higher Education (BHE) has evaluated the Letter of Intent of **Greenfield Community College** to award the **Associate of Applied Science in Surgical Technology** and has determined that the proposal aligns with BHE criteria. Accordingly, the BHE authorizes the Commissioner to review the program and to make a final determination on degree granting authority pursuant to the Fast-Track review protocol.

Authority Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 15A, Section 9(b); AAC 18-40 (June 2018)

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

Gabrieli introduced BHE Motion 25-31, *Approval of Early Childhood Educator Loan Repayment Program Guidelines*. Department of Higher Education Commissioner Noe Ortega introduced Commissioner Amy Kershaw from the Department of Early Education and Care (EEC), noting their shared commitment to addressing the early educator pipeline. He highlighted the significance of early education in his own career and its overall importance in the educational continuum.

Commissioner Kershaw expressed gratitude for the Board's support and collaboration with EEC in developing resources for early education, framing it as critical for both economic development and preparing young students for future education. She highlighted the ongoing efforts to improve compensation for early educators, acknowledging that wages remain low despite a recent 20% salary increase. She also outlined the importance of loan forgiveness, scholarships, and other financial support to recruit and retain skilled educators.

Commissioner Kershaw provided background and context for the motion which seeks to establish guidelines to distribute \$7.5 million in funding EEC has secured for a New Early Education and Care Educator Scholarship Program. Per the legislative language, this is a loan repayment program that will be managed in collaboration with DHE and aims to support both current and aspiring educators with loan repayment of up to \$7,500 per year for those who commit to working in the field. Affirming that the guidelines for the program had already been

drafted in partnership with DHE, Commissioner Kershaw emphasized the importance of collaboration in enhancing the early education workforce.

Chair Gabrieli inquired about the types of loans eligible for repayment. DHE's Assistant Commissioner for student Financial Assistance Allison Connolly confirmed that both state and federal student loans would be covered under the program.

Vice Chair Chernow asked for clarity on the loan repayment program's scope and potential impact. Commissioner Kershaw explained that while the program was initially limited to incumbent staff with five or more years of experience, it was expanded to gather data on demand and interest. She noted that EEC has been running an early educator scholarship program since 2006, aiming to reduce the number of individuals still carrying loans. The new loan repayment initiative is part of a broader strategy to support the early education workforce with a total funding amount of \$7.5 million, as mandated by the Massachusetts state legislature. Ellen Grondine, EEC's Senior Associate Commissioner of Workforce Development, highlighted that the funding is a one-time effort included in the FY25 budget, with no current allocations in the Governor's FY26 budget proposal.

Board Member Judy Pagliuca raised a broader question regarding initiatives aimed at lowering the costs of obtaining necessary credentials for early educators, suggesting that many credential requirements may exceed the practical skills actually required to perform the work. Commissioner Kershaw responded that the EEC is actively working on multiple strategies to make obtaining certifications more affordable. This includes transitioning from a certification to a credentialing process and ensuring alignment between certification requirements and available coursework at the Community Colleges and four-year institutions. Commissioner Kershaw mentioned the enhancement of the Higher Education Scholarship Program, which has a funding amount of \$7.5 million and aims to reduce costs for the early education workforce. Additionally, new apprenticeship programs are being developed to allow educators to earn money while they complete their education, providing stipends and supporting credentialing. Ms. Grondine also highlighted efforts to recognize credit for prior learning, which allows those already in the field to demonstrate their skills and gain support without incurring additional costs.

Commissioner Kershaw mentioned the Career Pathways Program, which collaborates with the fifteen Community Colleges, and offers scholarships, stipends, and wraparound support for educators, many of whom are balancing work and family responsibilities aiming to enhance accessibility and affordability in higher education.

Ms. Grondine emphasized the importance of creating infrastructure at the Community Colleges to support first-generation college students. This may include guidance in navigating higher education and leveraging available resources, such as the Mass Reconnect program and the Early Childhood Education Scholarship.

Board Member Ann Christensen raised concerns regarding the loan repayment program's reliance on federal dollars, questioning how quickly the allocated \$7.5 million would be spent while noting the potential impact of changes at the federal level on the program's sustainability. Commissioner Kershaw clarified that the loan repayment program could benefit many educators and their families without being affected by federal changes, as it consists of a one-time allocation. She acknowledged that while the current funds are secure, any future loan repayment opportunities would depend on the federal landscape. Commissioner Kershaw also emphasized the importance of maximizing existing scholarship programs and minimizing student debt through career pathways and "free community college" initiatives.

Board Member Paul Mattera sought clarification on the BHE's role in the approval process for the loan repayment program. DHE Chief Legal Counsel Dena Papanikolaou explained that the legislative mandate requires collaboration between the Board of EEC and BHE to establish guidelines for the program. She noted that BHE has the statutory authority to develop and implement programs such as tuition waivers, scholarships, and loan repayments. BHE's responsibility includes preparing guidelines for distributing the \$7,500 funding per eligible educator. Chair Gabrieli interpreted BHE's role in this regard as primarily the fiscal agent, through which BHE provides input on parameters as mandated by the legislature, while EEC handles the program's operational aspects.

Commissioner Kershaw elaborated on the prioritization of applicants, emphasizing that while staff with five or more years of experience would receive priority, newer educators would also be eligible. This approach aims to retain staff in a field facing recruitment and retention challenges. Commissioner Kershaw reiterated that the guidelines were developed collaboratively, with BHE's input on eligibility criteria and the overall structure of the program, and she acknowledged that BHE's official action is required to authorize EEC to provide funding and run the program based on the established guidelines.

Board Member Niki Nguyen asked for clarification on what constitutes "outstanding educational debt" for eligibility in the loan repayment program. Ms. Grondine explained that eligible participants must have an existing loan in good standing. The loan repayment program allows for repayment up to \$7,500, but if an individual's loan is less than that amount, the repayment will only cover the loan balance and not exceed it. Commissioner Kershaw confirmed that there is no minimum threshold for debt; even those with smaller amounts (e.g., \$500 or \$1,000) can apply for the program. However, payments will go directly to the loan rather than to the individual.

Hearing no further discussion, Chair Gabrieli called for a vote. On a motion duly made and seconded, BHE 25-31 was approved by all members present through a roll call vote, as follows:

- Chris Gabrieli, Chair - Yes
- Mary Burns - Yes

- Harneen Chernow - Yes
- Ann Christensen - Yes
- Alex Cortez - Yes
- Bob LePage - Yes
- Paul Mattera - Yes
- Niki Nguyen - Yes
- Judy Pagliuca - Yes
- Bill Walczak – Yes

BHE 25-31

APPROVAL OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATOR LOAN REPAYMENT PROGRAM GUIDELINES

VOTED

The Board of Higher Education (BHE) hereby approves the attached Financial Aid Guidelines for the administration of the Early Childhood Educator Student Loan Repayment Program, as required under M.G.L. c. 15A, §19G. BHE delegates to the Commissioner the authority to move forward with implementing the provisions set forth in the proposed guidelines (“Attachment A”). The Commissioner shall provide periodic updates on the status of implementation.

Authority

M.G.L. c. 15A, §9(u); M.G.L. c. 15A, §19G; M.G.L. c. 15D, §§3, 4, and 5.

Contact

Clantha McCurdy, Senior Deputy Commissioner for Access and Student Financial Assistance and Constantia T. Papanikolaou, Chief Legal Counsel

Chair Gabrieli introduced the next motion, BHE Motion 25-32, *Approval of Massachusetts State College Building Authority Fiscal Year 2026 Rent Schedule and Operating Budget*. Chair Gabrieli welcomed members from the Massachusetts State College Building Authority (MSCBA). They introduced themselves as Kristin Murphy (Director of Administration and Budget), Jennifer Gonzalez (Deputy Director of Administration and Finance), and Laura Crotto (Associate Director of Systems and Internal Controls).

Member Walczak confirmed that he is a member of the MSCBA board, as a BHE appointee. He stated that the MSCBA board had voted to approve the rent schedule and operating budget proposals after extensive discussions over the past year, indicating that the topics had been well-vetted.

Vice Chair Chernow sought clarification on the relationship between BHE and MSCBA, specifically regarding the generation of proposals. Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou explained that BHE members serve an oversight, fiduciary role in their capacity as MSCBA board members, with the responsibility to review and approve, as well as the authority to veto, proposals from MSCBA.

Chair Gabrieli further elaborated on the proposal generation process as one where BHE reviews proposals from MSCBA, with consideration paid to the MSBA's financial analysis, recommendations regarding rent charges and new construction projects, and the MSCBA board's voting on these recommendations. Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou added that the BHE has three seats on the MSCBA board and emphasized their collaborative role. Ms. Gonzalez noted the challenges of participating in both boards due to time commitments but acknowledged the importance of collaboration on project approvals and awareness of campus activities.

Vice Chair Chernow inquired as to whether the BHE or the individual campuses drive the decision-making process regarding capital improvements. Ms. Gonzalez indicated that the proposals for projects, including occupancy and rent increases, originate from the institutions. The MSCBA then evaluates these proposals, and ultimately the BHE votes on the overall budget and priorities.

Chair Gabrieli inquired how the proposed rent increases relate to inflation rates and occupancy levels across different campuses. Ms. Gonzalez addressed the issue of underutilized dorms, explaining that some campuses have not reached full occupancy since the pandemic's onset. She mentioned ongoing efforts to explore the disposition of buildings and the need for special legislation allowing campuses to retain sale proceeds. Ms. Gonzalez added that campuses are also working on making their offerings more attractive to students and developing academic programs to boost enrollment.

Ms. Gonzalez explained that the budget process involves extensive discussions between campuses and MSCBA, which revolve around affordability and avoidance of steep future increases.

Member Pagliuca expressed a desire for a future BHE meeting to better understand BHE's oversight responsibilities regarding the MSCBA. She emphasized the need for strategic discussions about housing management for students, including potential public-private partnerships and addressing deferred maintenance issues. Chair Gabrieli agreed to consult with Commissioner Ortega to ensure that Board members feel informed about their responsibilities. He also acknowledged that while this topic has not been a primary strategic priority, it could be a valuable, future discussion item. Chair Gabrieli also highlighted an upcoming CHEQA meeting where Secretary Gorzkowicz will present information on the BRIGHT Act, which aims to allocate fair share funds for significant capital financing across various segments of education.

Noting no further discussion, Chair Gabrieli called for a vote. On a motion duly made and seconded, BHE Motion 25-32 was approved by all members present through a roll call vote, as follows:

- Chris Gabrieli, Chair - Yes
- Mary Burns - Yes
- Harneen Chernow - Yes
- Ann Christensen - Yes
- Alex Cortez - Yes
- Bob LePage - Yes
- Paul Mattera - Yes
- Niki Nguyen - Yes
- Judy Pagliuca - Yes
- Bill Walczak - Yes

**BHE 25-32 APPROVAL OF MASSACHUSETTS STATE COLLEGE BUILDING
AUTHORITY FISCAL YEAR 2026 RENT SCHEDULE AND OPERATING
BUDGET**

VOTED The Board of Higher Education hereby approves the attached Massachusetts State College Building Authority Fiscal Year 2026 Schedule of Proposed Rents and Operating Budget for the Authority and State University Residence Halls, effective July 1, 2025, provided that any increase in the rent schedule shall be subject to the approval of the Board of Higher Education.

Authority Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 73 App., Section 1-9 as amended and the Contract for Financial Assistance, Management and Services, dated February 1, 2003, made between the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, acting by and through the Board of Higher Education and the Massachusetts State College Building Authority.

Contact Matt Cole, Deputy Commissioner of Administration, Finance, and Operations

IV. DISCUSSION

- **Commissioner’s Annual Performance Evaluation**

Chair Gabrieli turned to the review of Commissioner Ortega's performance evaluation for the calendar year 2024. He stated that he prepared a draft for Board member consideration and facilitated discussion, and he proceeded to provide a summary of key points from his working draft.

Chair Gabrieli noted that his overall assessment of the Commissioner's performance is positive, highlighting progress and effective methods in achieving set goals listed on the Commissioner's self-evaluation. The first priority he discussed was the establishment of multi-year top priorities and near-term action agendas. Chair Gabrieli emphasized that this was a significant achievement, with three of the four selected areas well-defined following the recent retreat. These areas include financial aid, economic mobility, and public good, each with specific goals. The second priority involved enhancing the Department's engagement with the Board. Chair Gabrieli expressed that the introduction of the "Commissioner's Spotlight" segment during Board meetings has improved communication between both bodies while enhancing Board Members' understanding of the Commissioner's initiatives. Chair Gabrieli also recognized the Commissioner's efforts to streamline meetings and enhance strategic discussions during retreats.

Member Walczak suggested the potential impact of federal developments on Massachusetts should be acknowledged in the Board's review of Commissioner Ortega's performance. Chair Gabrieli concurred with Member Walczak, stating that the upcoming year may present challenges due to changes in federal policy while emphasizing the Department's role in navigating these challenges.

Chair Gabrieli indicated that the review's final draft would be shared with Board members for approval before the next BHE meeting.

Member Mattera shared positive impressions of Commissioner Ortega's outreach efforts during his tenure. He noted that Commissioner Ortega's commitment to visiting campuses frequently has significantly improved engagement with segmental representatives while fostering a better understanding of campus life and initiatives.

Chair Gabrieli discussed Commissioner Ortega's third priority related to improving Department efficiencies. He acknowledged the challenges posed by a statewide hiring freeze and emphasized the importance of implementing strategies effectively. Chair Gabrieli also suggested that objective metrics, such as stakeholder feedback, could enhance understanding of the Department's performance.

Vice Chair Chernow highlighted two key themes related to Commissioner Ortega's leadership. She expressed appreciation for the Commissioner's openness to diverse voices and engaging with various partners, which she views as a critical part of effective governance. Vice Chair Chernow also emphasized the importance of maintaining an open and engaged environment, especially given the Board's significant role in shaping higher education policy in the

Commonwealth.

Chair Gabrieli indicated that the Commissioner's final priority was to raise both the DHE and BHE's respective profiles. He emphasized the importance of increasing influence on critical higher education issues in Massachusetts, beyond media visibility. Chair Gabrieli noted that meaningful change requires broader engagement and respect for the Board's insights. He commended Commissioner Ortega and his team for successfully broadening their influence and credibility within the higher education landscape.

Chair Gabrieli described the Commissioner's performance as strong, echoing the Board Members' unqualified, positive feedback. Chair Gabrieli also emphasized that 2025 is a pivotal year for advancing strategic goals related to innovation, economic mobility, and student success. He also praised the Commissioner's personal approach to leadership, highlighting traits in fostering a collaborative atmosphere within the board and Department.

Member Cortez inquired about the availability of pre-reading materials or speakers related to the upcoming discussion on three-year degrees. Commissioner Noe Ortega confirmed that Deputy Commissioner for Academic Affairs and Student Success Rick Riccardi would coordinate a panel of speakers for the meeting. Each panelist will provide brief opening remarks and be available for questions from Board members. Deputy Commissioner Riccardi mentioned that he would provide panelists with questions from the previous Board meeting to guide their remarks. He also indicated that while there wouldn't be a formal slide deck, he would ensure relevant contextual information is shared with the board. Chair Gabrieli clarified that the meeting would not be a decision-making session but rather an opportunity for in-depth discussion on broader issues related to higher education, particularly the implications of three-year degrees.

Commissioner Ortega recommended circulating additional articles, particularly from sources he considered credible such as *The Chronicle*, to help Board members prepare for the discussion. He further noted the value of having diverse perspectives to enrich the conversation.

V. ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 3:51 p.m.

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