

MASSACHUSETTS BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

March 28, 2025

10:00 a.m.

Via Zoom

Meeting Minutes

A meeting of the Board of Higher Education (BHE or Board) was held on Friday, March 28, 2025, remotely via teleconference (Zoom).

The following Board Members were present:

Chris Gabrieli, Chair

Harneen Chernow, Vice Chair

Mary Burns

Ann Christensen¹

Veronica Conforme

Bob LePage, Secretary of Education Designee

Paul Mattera

Niki Nguyen, Voting Student Member, State University Segment

Christina Royal

Bill Walczak

Noe Ortega, Commissioner and Secretary to the Board

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

The following Board Members or Advisors were absent:

Danielle Allen

Alex Cortez

Judy Pagliuca

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

I. CALL TO ORDER

Board Chair Chris Gabrieli called the meeting to order at 10:03 a.m. Roll call attendance was taken (see above for attendance roster).

¹ Arrived at 10:10 am, after roll call attendance was taken.

Chair Gabrieli noted that this Special Board Meeting was convened for the sole purpose of deliberating over and voting on a single Board motion which, if adopted, would authorize Commissioner of Higher Education to establish and manage an expendable trust dedicated to system-wide innovation. Chair Gabrieli continued his remarks with a [presentation](#) that provided context for the Board motion, and acknowledged the Board's evolving, innovation-related discussions over this past year, culminating in the approval of four (4) strategic priorities in January 2025. Chair Gabrieli emphasized that innovation is not a goal in and of itself but rather is intended to support the Board's broader goal to reduce disparities and address the needs of underserved student populations through financial aid and student success programs that foster economic mobility.

While acknowledging that many Massachusetts campuses are already continuously innovating, Chair Gabrieli noted that some innovations are more effectively achieved systematically by the Department through regulations, policies and funding. He emphasized that innovative ideas should come from both Massachusetts campuses and a "national role model" of promising practices across the country.

Chair Gabrieli noted that the Board adopted a set of five-year goals as well as a set of ten-month goals, one of which is to recruit a small yet effective team with the necessary resources to execute innovation-minded work and conduct pilot initiatives. To that end, Chair Gabrieli explained that the Board has an opportunity to establish a dedicated trust fund of \$2.1 million, derived from a grant awarded by the independent, nonprofit entity Axim Collaborative. This funding would allow the Department to create an "Innovation Hub," with dedicated staff and resources, that will launch a set of initial promising pilots aligned with the Board's own strategic priority plan, while developing a longer-term plan for sustainable, innovation-related funding.

Commissioner Ortega expressed excitement about the opportunities that the grant presents, and he further noted that the funding will better position the Department to deliver on and expand upon its priorities.

Senior Deputy Commissioner Jose Luis Santos shared that the Department would be looking to add an "innovation unit" within the Commissioner's Office. The Innovation Hub will be charged with developing a strategic innovation agenda within the Department and be able to run projects through a "complete innovation cycle". The cycle would include opportunity

identification, pilot implementation, evaluation, and appropriate scaling. The goal is also to build and sustain key relationships across campuses, as well as between, experts, philanthropic partners and others.

Board Member Walczak inquired about campus involvement raised the possibility of campuses simultaneously competing over the same grant funding.

Chair Gabrieli explained that pilot program ideas would be drawn directly from institutions in Massachusetts and around the country. He also stated his hope to initiate a process by the upcoming summer through which campuses can identify issues and solutions, as well as ideas for scaling. Chair Gabrieli also acknowledged that there are many funding opportunities in the field of higher education innovation which are supportive of systematic change, and this is intended to support system-wide approaches.

Board Member Christina Royal inquired as to the extent of Axim's influence in deciding which priorities receive funding. In response, Chair Gabrieli stated that, like any grant agreement, they are giving us a grant to do the things we said we want to do. Accordingly, Axim is not making any decisions on our behalf. Chief Legal Counsel Constantia Papanikolaou added that neither DHE nor BHE will cede any decision-making authority to Axim, but rather Axim will provide "seed money" to help launch the Innovation Hub. Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou stated that an "expendable trust" instrument will serve as a vessel for receiving the funding and establishes the terms under which funds will be administered. Under the terms of the trust, DHE Deputy Commissioner of Administration, Finance, and Operations, Matt Cole, will serve as trustee for funds received, while Commissioner Ortega and Senior Deputy Commissioner Santos will manage the Innovation Hub.

Member Royal applauded Commissioner Ortega for elevating innovation as a DHE priority, and suggested the formation of an advisory committee consisting of campus representatives in order to strike a balance between system-wide and campus-specific priorities.

Vice Chair Harneen Chernow congratulated the Commissioner for his innovation-related work and expressed hope for the future of equitable access to resources in higher education. Vice

Chair Chernow also expressed gratitude for the Commissioner's prioritization of innovation in spite of the troubling national context.

Board Member Ann Christensen expressed her own appreciation for the Board's discussion and acknowledged that higher education is at a crossroads. In turn, she encouraged further consideration of non-degree credentials in light of reduced student enrollment and workforce needs. Board Member Christensen emphasized that Massachusetts must continue to prioritize educational access and quality while remaining adaptive in the years ahead.

II. ACCEPTANCE OF MINUTES

None

III. MOTIONS

[BHE 25-35](#)

Authorization for Commissioner to Establish an Expendable Trust for the Purpose of Supporting System-Wide Innovation and Approval of Commissioner's Intended Use of Funds

[Attachment A](#)

Chair Gabrieli introduced BHE Motion 25-35, *Authorize the Commissioner to Establish an Expendable Trust*.

In the absence of any further discussion, Chair Gabrieli called for a vote. On a motion duly made and seconded, BHE 25-35 was approved unanimously by all Board Members present through a roll call vote, as follows:

- Chris Gabrieli, Chair - Yes
- Mary Burns - Yes
- Harneen Chernow, Vice Chair - Yes
- Ann Christensen - Yes
- Veronica Conforme - Yes
- Bob LePage - Yes
- Niki Nguyen - Yes

- Christina Royal - Yes
- Bill Walczak – Yes

**BHE 25-35 AUTHORIZATION FOR COMMISSIONER TO ESTABLISH AN
EXPENDABLE TRUST FOR THE PURPOSE OF SUPPORTING
SYSTEM-WIDE INNOVATION AND APPROVAL OF
COMMISSIONER’S INTENDED USE OF FUNDS**

VOTED The Board of Higher Education (the “Board”) hereby authorizes the Commissioner, pursuant to M.G.L. c. 15A, §9(n), to establish “The Department of Higher Education Innovation Hub Trust” for the purpose of accepting, on behalf of the Commonwealth, funds to be used and expended by the Department for the purpose of establishing and supporting a system-wide innovation function within the Department. The Board further approves the terms of said Expendable Trust, including the intended disbursements, as set forth in Attachment A.

Authority Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 15A, § 9(n)

Contact José Luis Santos, Ph.D., Senior Deputy Commissioner & Special Advisor to the Commissioner

IV. ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 10:51 a.m.

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