

## MASSACHUSETTS BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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November 25, 2025

10:00 a.m.

Via Zoom

Special Meeting

### Meeting Minutes

A meeting of the Board of Higher Education (BHE or Board) was held on Tuesday, November 25, 2025, remotely via teleconference (Zoom).

The following Board Members were present:

Chris Gabrieli, Chair  
Danielle Allen  
Harneen Chernow, Vice-Chair  
Lisa Battaglinio  
Mary Burns  
Ann Christensen<sup>1</sup>  
Veronica Conforme  
Alex Cortez  
Bob LePage, Secretary of Education Designee  
Patrick Tutwiler, Secretary of Education<sup>2</sup>  
Bill Walczak

Noe Ortega, Commissioner and Secretary to the Board

Hannah Rosenkrantz, Non-voting Student Advisor, University of Massachusetts Segment

The following Board Members or Advisors were absent:

Michael Hannigan, Voting Student Member, Community College Segment  
Judy Pagliuca  
Christina Royal

### I. CALL TO ORDER

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<sup>1</sup> Arrived after roll call attendance was taken.

<sup>2</sup> Departed early for a previously scheduled meeting. Secretary of Education Designee, Bob LePage was present, and stepped in for the Secretary upon the Secretary's departure.

Board Chair Chris Gabrieli called the regular meeting of the Board to order at 10:03 a.m. Roll call attendance was taken (see above for attendance roster). Chair Gabrieli noted that this was the first in a new series of special meetings developed in collaboration with Vice Chair Harneen Chernow and Commissioner Ortega focusing on timely actions and discussions requiring Board attention, such as institutional strategic plans and key policy updates. Chair Gabrieli further noted that the Board will have opportunities at future meetings and retreats to assess whether this format is an efficient and effective way to conduct its business.

## **II. PRESENTATIONS**

*List of Documents Used:*

[PowerPoint Presentation- Earnings Report Commentary](#)

Earnings Report Commentary

Commissioner Ortega began by noting that although two items had originally been scheduled for presentation on today's agenda, with the Chair's agreement, the Department would focus only on the earnings report. Chair Gabrieli confirmed that they will be tabling a presentation on the Commission on Higher Education Quality and Affordability (CHEQA) report, as it was not ready for release, but it is expected to come before the Board at its December meeting.

Commissioner Ortega proceeded to present a report on the recently released update to the Performance Management Reporting System (PMRS) and related commentary on economic mobility. In introducing the earnings report, Commissioner Ortega expressed his appreciation for the Department's institutional research and policy team members who contributed to this work, including Deputy Commissioner for Policy Michael Dannenberg; Associate Commissioner Mario Delci; and staff members Sarah Mealey and Symantha Clough. He reminded the Board that, following prior Board action, staff had spent several years developing new earnings indicators that, as of the previous week, are now live and publicly available on the PMRS dashboard.

Commissioner Ortega noted that "affordability" and "student outcomes," including post-college earnings, are two primary drivers of the national conversation on higher education's value. He noted that the Board has explicitly identified upward economic mobility as one of its priorities and that, consistent with this commitment, the Department is now positioned to begin sharing earnings information with students and families as they make decisions about college. He explained that, in addition to the PMRS data, the Department has issued an accompanying

commentary designed to foster dialogue among stakeholders about the findings, and he underscored the Board's responsibility to be transparent with learners about these results.

Commissioner Ortega also reported that the release of the earnings outcomes report and commentary – which had been celebrated the prior week at an event with the Healey Administration - reinforce the narrative that in Massachusetts, "the more you learn, the more you earn."

### Overview

Commissioner Ortega then turned the presentation over to Deputy Commissioner for Policy Michael Dannenberg, who reiterated that the report shared generally good news regarding the value proposition of higher education in Massachusetts. He shared that the latest PMRS data and associated commentary show that: enrollment is up, particularly at the community college level; degree completion remains a challenge but that early indicators show promise; and earnings are high for those who graduate.

### Affordability and Net Price

Deputy Commissioner Dannenberg stated that the net price of college (i.e. out-of-pocket expenses after financial aid is conferred) is one of the most important indicators of affordability. He stated that financial aid awards have increased at a greater rate than tuition and fees. As a result, the net price of college attendance has decreased nationally, and particularly in Massachusetts.

Deputy Commissioner Dannenberg also noted that the percentage of students paying \$0 for tuition and fees has risen, especially among working-class students at both two-year and four-year institutions. For example, Deputy Commissioner Dannenberg noted that the percentage of students at two-year institutions paying \$0 in tuition and fees will have increased from 67% in 2024 to nearly 100% at the end of 2025, once most recent data are accounted for. He further explained that the percentage of students paying \$0 is also climbing at four-year institutions due to investments made in MASSGrant Plus expansion.

### Enrollment

Turning to enrollment, Deputy Commissioner Dannenberg stated that the increase in affordability has contributed to a marked increase in enrollment. He reported that total enrollment in the public higher education system now exceeds pre-pandemic levels, and this enrollment increase is most pronounced in the Community College segment, where there has been a 38.5% boost in enrollment during the Healey–Driscoll Administration. Meanwhile, enrollment at the State Universities and UMass has remained relatively stable.

Deputy Commissioner Dannenberg stated that this enrollment shift has changed the composition of the public higher education student body; whereas Community Colleges accounted for about 42% of public higher education enrollment five years ago, they now account for more than half, which is more consistent with data from fifteen years ago.

### Completion

Deputy Commissioner Dannenberg then addressed challenges related to degree completion, stating that completion rates at the community college level are low and below the national average, while completion rates at the State Universities are also in decline. He cited a six-year community college completion rate of 35.2% (measured six years from initial enrollment), noting that this falls below the Commonwealth's target as well as the national average.

However, he reported that there are "green shoots" at the community college level that correlate with investments in the Community College SUCCESS Program, including increases in the percentage of students who are retained, and the percentage of students accumulating credits on time.

Deputy Commissioner Dannenberg stated that the share of students accumulating credits on time has been rising and that this is an early indicator of eventual completion. He referenced research from the Community College Research Center at Columbia University indicating that students who complete credits on time, close to the 24-credit threshold over an academic year, are 18 percentage points more likely to complete than those who do not. Based on these trends, he expected that the 35.2% statewide community college completion rate will increase in the future.

### State Universities and UMass

At the State Universities, Deputy Commissioner Dannenberg noted that completion rates are declining overall, and this decline is particularly sharp for Black and Latino students.

He reported that a relatively new State University SUCCESS Program, modeled on the Community College SUCCESS Program, has recently launched at the State Universities, and he expressed hope that it will contribute to increases in on-time credit accumulation and completion at that level as well.

With respect to the UMass segment, Deputy Commissioner Dannenberg shared that completion rates are relatively stable, but that the gap between overall student completion levels and those of historically and currently underserved groups is growing, which remains a concern.

### Earnings and the Go Higher Report

Deputy Commissioner Dannenberg stated that success in completion is crucial for post-higher education income and turned to findings from the new “Go Higher” earnings report, which indicates that students who complete their degree programs earn between 17% and 35% more within five years of graduation than their peers who “stop out” and do not complete a degree program. Specifically, the disparity in earnings between degree completers and non-completers is 17% to 21% in the Community College and State University segments, and as much as 35% for UMass students.

He further stated that these percentage differences translate into specific median income levels for families. He reported that the median earnings difference between someone whose education ends with a high school diploma and someone who completes an associate’s degree is almost \$20,000, and that, for those with a bachelor’s degree, the difference is over \$30,000 five years following program exit. He also noted that the median associate-degree holder earns more five years out than a bachelor’s-degree holder at the 25th percentile.

### Field of Study

Deputy Commissioner Dannenberg then discussed the strong correlation between field of study and earnings. He reported that students who study in health fields at the associate-degree level have substantially higher earnings than students who study in education, even though educators are greatly needed. He also noted that median earnings for associate-degree graduates in health or STEM fields five years after graduation are substantially higher than for students in the same cohort whose terminal credential is a bachelor’s degree in the arts or humanities. Deputy Commissioner Dannenberg referenced other research indicating that earnings for arts and humanities majors tend to increase markedly between five and ten years after graduation—particularly around years eight to ten—and that earnings increase especially for those who go on to attend graduate school.

### Earnings Gaps and Equity

Deputy Commissioner Dannenberg also explained that higher education helps close earnings gaps, tying this to the Board’s economic mobility priority. He noted that students from economically distressed backgrounds who end their education with a high school diploma earn about \$35,000 on median ten years after completion, while their non-low-income peers who likewise conclude their studies with a high school credential earn significantly more. He then contrasted this with Massachusetts data for individuals who have completed associate or bachelor’s degrees, stating that the earnings differences between those from economically distressed backgrounds and non-low-income students are substantially smaller—about half of the high-school-only gap—and even smaller at the bachelor’s level.

Deputy Commissioner Dannenberg observed that the gender earnings gap persists. He stated that, although individuals who pursue higher education, regardless of gender, earn substantially more than those who do not—especially if they complete—a roughly 20% earnings gap between men and women continues across all levels of educational attainment, whether a person ends their education with a high school diploma, an associate’s degree, or a bachelor’s degree.

### Conclusion and Data Sources

In closing, Deputy Commissioner Dannenberg stated that the overall message is very positive: value is high in Massachusetts; affordability is up; earnings are up; enrollment is up; and, although completion remains a challenge, earnings outcomes for completers are strong. He directed Board members and the public to [www.mass.edu/earnings](http://www.mass.edu/earnings) for more information on the report and to [www.mass.edu/PMRS](http://www.mass.edu/PMRS) for institution-level data.

### Board Discussion and Reflections on Earnings Report

Commissioner Ortega stated that, because of the work of institutions, leaders, and the Legislature, Massachusetts is pushing back on negative narratives about the value of higher education and demonstrating that college is, in fact, worth it. He stressed that this central message should not be lost in the broader narrative and then turned the meeting back to Chair Gabrieli to facilitate any discussion.

Chair Gabrieli reflected on the Board’s prior actions, noting that in 2018, the Board voted to add earnings data to the PMRS and that, in January of 2025, it voted to make economic mobility one of its top priorities. He stressed that, while the Board deeply values higher education for reasons beyond economic returns, the majority of students in the public higher education system seek economic advancement.

Chair Gabrieli identified several questions that arise from the data, including whether campuses are making decisions that support higher graduation rates given the large gaps between completers and non-completers; whether they are offering the right mix of degree programs; and whether K–12 guidance systems are adequately informing students about their trade-offs and options. He also highlighted the potential of work-based learning and referenced the co-op expansion program funded under the AXIM Collaborative Innovation Agenda as a promising strategy to help students secure stronger first jobs.

Board Member Bill Walczak commented on recent media coverage of the earnings report, noting a *Boston Globe* editorial whose headline compared Roxbury Community College (RCC) and Bunker Hill Community College in a way that, in his view, unfairly portrayed RCC as unsuccessful. He stated that the Governor’s press conference had clearly communicated that

students benefit economically regardless of whether they attend a community college, state university, or the University of Massachusetts, so long as they complete their degree program. He emphasized that RCC is successful in raising the economic prospects of its graduates and cautioned against conclusions that any individual community college is “not doing well” based solely on such headlines. He urged that the Board and others respond to the editorial—particularly the headline—to affirm that Massachusetts’ community college system, including RCC, is successful for the students and communities it serves.

Board Member Lisa Battaglini then asked Deputy Commissioner Dannenberg to restate and elaborate on the gender earnings gap data, which she described as both important and troubling. Deputy Commissioner Dannenberg replied that the data show an approximate 20% earnings gap five years after graduation, with men earning about 20% more than women among public higher education graduates. He noted that this pattern persists even within specific degree fields; for example, women earn about 20% less than men within STEM programs, suggesting the disparity is not solely explained by different program choices. He stressed that the Department has not attempted to determine causation and has not conducted a deeper dive into this question but included the finding because it is important to present “good and bad” data transparently and to invite further research.

Chair Chris Gabrieli added that he, Deputy Commissioner Dannenberg, and others had discussed the gender gap finding at length, as well as potential explanations, including program choice. He expressed hope that Massachusetts can be a “leadership state” in this area by making appropriate data sets available to external researchers to examine questions such as the gender gap and inter-campus differences more deeply. He agreed with Member Walczak that headlines can be inflammatory and are outside the Board’s control, but he suggested that campuses use the data as an opportunity to examine their outcomes across subgroups (by socioeconomic status, race, gender, and program) and to engage in constructive comparison with peer institutions. He underscored that the Department’s responsibility is to be an objective source of information about higher education outcomes, to present the data as they are, and to highlight both positive results and opportunities for improvement. He also referenced national findings that many college graduates take first jobs that do not require a degree, with negative implications for earnings both immediately and ten years later, and expressed interest in exploring whether this is true in Massachusetts and how work-based learning initiatives can help students, particularly first-generation students, secure stronger first jobs.

Vice-Chair Harneen Chernow acknowledged the Board’s ongoing focus on degree completion, noting how strongly economic outcomes diverge based on whether students complete their programs. She referenced prior presentations on completion data by Associate Commissioner for Research and Planning Mario Delci and stressed that students who do not finish often carry

debt without sufficient earnings to repay it, with serious long-term consequences. She also situated the earnings data in a broader labor market context, noting persistent labor market segregation and unequal compensation across occupations and credentials, even within sectors such as health care. She observed that broader policies (for example, minimum wage and other economic supports) shape whether graduates enter jobs that provide a living wage and benefits, and encouraged the Board to consider how its work intersects with these wider inequities, recognizing that degrees can help mitigate—but do not by themselves eliminate—structural disparities.

Commissioner Ortega reminded Board members that the Department’s work over the past year has involved several interconnected focus areas—from affordability and student success, to economic mobility—and emphasized that economic outcomes are not the only benefit of higher education. He stressed that there is also a “public good” dimension of higher education that benefits the Commonwealth and society at large, and he indicated that the Board would work to further develop this priority.

Chair Gabrieli encouraged Board members and stakeholders not to overlook the significant gains in affordability, particularly the growth in the share of students at four-year institutions paying zero tuition and fees as a result of recent state investments. He noted that Massachusetts has also made substantial progress in reducing net price for four-year students, and that these gains represent meaningful, if potentially fragile, advances for students that should be recognized even as the Board continues to push for better outcomes.

### **III. BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION MOTIONS**

*List of documents used:*

[BHE 26-29](#) and [Attachment A](#)  
[BHE 26-30](#)

#### **Approval of Roxbury Community College Strategic Plan**

Chair Gabrieli introduced motion BHE-26-29, the *Roxbury Community College Strategic Plan*, and asked Deputy Commissioner Riccardi and RCC President Jonathan Jefferson to provide background and context for the motion, and an overview on the institution’s strategic plan.

President Jonathan Jefferson thanked the Chair, Commissioner, Secretary, and Board of Higher Education for the opportunity to present RCC’s strategic plan (the “Plan”). He expressed gratitude to the Boston Consulting Group, which conducted a substantive external analysis over eight weeks that helped RCC clarify its future direction.



President Jefferson explained that RCC's primary goal is to become a career-ready work college built on a learn-and-earn model, under which every student—whether in credit or noncredit programs—will have at least one paid internship opportunity. He reported that RCC will focus on three primary program areas (health careers, STEM, and business) and three additional areas aligned with community and state needs (early childhood education, criminal justice, and social sciences, particularly psychology and social work).

President Jefferson acknowledged several people who contributed to the development and drafting of the Plan, including his executive leadership team, RCC community members, faculty and staff. He stated that the Plan is organized around five "P's"— purpose, people, programming, partnerships, and place — and is designed to envision what the college will look like in 2030. He reported that RCC has balanced its budget, ended the last fiscal year with a surplus, and established a rainy-day fund in FY25. The Plan calls for continuing to balance the budget annually and building reserves over the next five years. He further noted that RCC was recently reaffirmed for NECHE accreditation.

Chair Gabrieli thanked President Jefferson and reiterated his strong support for the Plan's work-based learning emphasis and its focused programmatic priorities.

Board Member Alex Cortez praised the Plan's rigor around measurement, noting that strategic plans often lack clear metrics but that RCC's plan demonstrates a strong commitment to management-related metrics.

Board Member Walczak stated that the Plan aligns community need and opportunity extraordinarily well and commended RCC's commitment to using data to monitor and assess progress.

Vice-Chair Chernow commented that the Plan's SWOT (*Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats*) analysis provided a candid depiction of the challenges facing higher education—and especially urban higher education—in the current political and economic environment. She noted that the document clearly surfaced issues that the Board has discussed, including completion, enrollment, and declining high school populations, and she appreciated the Plan's transparency and clarity. She also highlighted the Plan's references to partnerships with Boston Public Schools (BPS) and youth, including dual enrollment and prior efforts with Madison Park Technical Vocational High School (MPTVHS).

Hearing no further discussion, Chair Gabrieli called for a vote. On a motion duly made and seconded, BHE 26-29 was approved by members present through a roll call vote, as follows:

- Chris Gabrieli, Chair – Yes
- Danielle Allen – Yes

- Lisa Battaglino – Yes
- Mary Burns – Yes
- Harneen Chernow, Vice-Chair – Yes
- Ann Christensen – Yes
- Veronica Conforme – Yes
- Alex Cortez – Yes
- Assistant Secretary Bob LePage – Abstain
- Bill Walczak – Yes

**BHE 26-29      APPROVAL OF ROXBURY COMMUNITY COLLEGE STRATEGIC PLAN**

**VOTED**      The Board of Higher Education (the Board) hereby approves the Roxbury Community College Strategic Plan 2025-2030, subject to the institution ensuring that all strategies within the plan will be implemented consistent with relevant state and federal laws as well as guidance issued by the Massachusetts Attorney General; and provided further that the institution is authorized to make revisions to the document as needed from time to time to maintain compliance. The Board further authorizes the Commissioner to forward the strategic plan to the Secretary of Education for final approval pursuant to Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 15A, Sections 9(l) and 22(l).

**Authority**      Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 15A, Sections 7, 9(f), 9(l) and 22(l); BHE By-Laws, Article I, Section 3 and Article III.

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

**Approval of Amended Guidelines for the MassEducate, MassReconnect and MassGrant Plus Financial Aid Programs**

Chair Gabrieli introduced BHE 26-30, the *Approval of Amended Guidelines for the MassEducate, MassReconnect and MassGrant Plus Financial Aid Programs*, which would amend the financial aid guidelines for those three named programs.

Commissioner Ortega noted that Senior Deputy Commissioner Dr. Jose Luis Santos, Senior Associate Commissioner Robert Brun, and Deputy Commissioner Matthew Cole, were present to support the motion and respond to questions. He explained that on November 19, 2025 the Massachusetts legislature approved a supplemental budget that includes \$18.3 million to support financial aid and, specifically, offset reductions made earlier in the year. Commissioner Ortega reminded members that, due to budget constraints, the student allowance (stipend)

associated with MassEducate, MassReconnect, and MASSGrant Plus had been reduced from \$1,200 to \$1,000. The supplemental funding would position the Department to restore those allowances and address other related needs. He explained that the legislation currently sits on the Governor's desk and has not yet been finalized, but the Department is seeking Board approval in advance so that, once enacted, staff can move quickly to amend program guidelines and work with institutions to implement the restorations.

Chair Gabrieli then offered a broader reflection on financing stability in public higher education, noting that the Board would further discuss related issues at its next meeting in connection with recommendations made by the Commission on Higher Education Quality and Affordability (CHEQA). He emphasized the importance of moving toward a framework in which state financial aid commitments are economically sustainable and predictable over time, so that students and families clearly understand the support they can expect.

He observed that managing key financial aid-related commitments such as Free Community College and free four-year public education for Pell-eligible students within annual budget cycles is challenging and that annual adjustments are not ideal. He expressed gratitude that efforts by many stakeholders in the administration and Legislature resulted in a supplemental budget that allows a return to the original stipend level, and he underscored the need, going forward, for accurate projections and sustainable funding so that students experience consistent, reliable support.

Secretary of Education Designee LePage clarified that student stipends were not reduced in Fall 2024. Students received in Fall 2024 the same stipend amount they received in the previous Fall; nothing was taken away from them for that term. But there was a question as to whether the Commonwealth could afford to match that stipend level in spring, pending clearer information on enrollment and available resources. Secretary of Education Designee LePage stated that, with the supplemental funding and updated enrollment data, the Department is now able to confirm the availability of resources to provide spring stipends at the same level as the prior year, effectively restoring what had been paused.

Chair Gabrieli thanked Secretary of Education Designee LePage for the clarification and characterized the outcome here as "all good news" for students, while acknowledging that public debate can occasionally create tension even as the state is doing "really great things." He reiterated his appreciation to the administration and Legislature for including the necessary funding—on the order of approximately \$18 million—to restore the stipend level, and he noted the non-trivial complexity of administering expanded financial aid programs. Chair Gabrieli stated that he was pleased to support the motion and that the item represents an important step in maintaining the state's commitments to students. Hearing no further discussion, Chair

Gabrieli called for a vote. On a motion duly made and seconded, BHE 26-30 was approved unanimously by all members present through a roll call vote, as follows:

- Chris Gabrieli, Chair – Yes
- Danielle Allen – Yes
- Lisa Battaglini – Yes
- Mary Burns – Yes
- Harneen Chernow, Vice-Chair – Yes
- Ann Christensen – Yes
- Veronica Conforme – Yes
- Alex Cortez – Yes
- Assistant Secretary Bob LePage – Yes
- Bill Walczak – Yes

**BHE 26-30      APPROVAL OF AMENDED GUIDELINES FOR THE MASSEDUCATE, MASSRECONNECT, AND MASSGRANT PLUS FINANCIAL AID PROGRAMS**

**VOTED**            The Board of Higher Education (Board) hereby authorizes the Commissioner, subject to appropriation, to increase the student Allowance and Support Award threshold from \$1000 to up to \$1,200 across the MassEducate, MassReconnect, and MASSGrant Plus programs, and further directs the Commissioner to amend the guidelines for each program, as deemed necessary and appropriate, to implement this change retroactively for all students assessed as eligible for the 2025-2026 academic year; provided further that this amendment shall not negatively impact any students' eligibility for other state financial aid, including any additional allowance and support awards available to eligible students pursuant to the Board's MassGrant program.

**Authority**            Massachusetts General Laws c. 15A, §§ 5B, 6, 9, and 16; FY2026 GAA: Chapter 9 of the Acts of 2025 (Line Items 1596-2501, 1596-2418, 7070-0065, and 1596 2414); H4761.

**Contact**            José Luis Santos, Senior Deputy Commissioner  
Robert Brun, Senior Associate Commissioner for Student Financial Assistance

**IV. OTHER BUSINESS**

None.

## **V. ADJOURNMENT**

The meeting was adjourned at 11:07 a.m.

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