

## MASSACHUSETTS BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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February 10, 2026

10:00 a.m.

Via Zoom

### Meeting Minutes

A meeting of the Board of Higher Education (BHE or Board) was held on Tuesday, February 10, 2026, remotely via teleconference (Zoom).

The following Board Members were present:

Chris Gabrieli, Chair

Harneen Chernow, Vice Chair

Danielle Allen

Lisa Battaglino

Mary Burns<sup>1</sup>

Ann Christensen<sup>1</sup>

Veronica Conforme<sup>1</sup>

Michael Hannigan, Voting Student Member, Community College Segment

Patrick Tutwiler, Secretary of Education

Bill Walczak

Noe Ortega, Commissioner and Secretary to the Board

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

The following Board Members were absent:

Alex Cortez

### I. CALL TO ORDER

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).

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

## II. COMMISSIONER'S SPOTLIGHT

### *Documents Used:*

- [Commissioner's Spotlight](#) (PowerPoint)

Commissioner Noe Ortega thanked members of the Board for their participation in the Board's retreat earlier in the year and noted that the retreat helped the Department drill down on shared priorities. He stated that the Department has made a commitment to provide the Board with ongoing updates on progress toward key deliverables aligned with each BHE priority area.

Commissioner Ortega then restated the Department's current priority framework: financial aid and student success, economic mobility, innovation, and the public good. He emphasized that these priorities are aligned with the Department's equity commitments, including its goal of closing persistent gaps and ensuring that all learners in Massachusetts have access to high-quality postsecondary opportunities.

Commissioner Ortega stated that this meeting's Commissioner Spotlight segment would focus on financial aid and student success, and he reminded the Board of commitments discussed at the retreat connected to that priority area. He highlighted the Department's continued focus on pre-collegiate marketing and recruitment and emphasized the importance of building on successes from the Department's GEAR UP program, which has strengthened financial aid advising and post-secondary guidance for participating high school students over the past two decades. He explained that the Department intends to apply lessons learned from GEAR UP to expand postsecondary advising and outreach efforts more broadly.

Commissioner Ortega emphasized the importance of pre-collegiate marketing and recruitment in terms of further strengthening partnerships with DESE. He explained that the DHE aims to be more proactive in its outreach and marketing efforts, particularly during the current FAFSA outreach push, and encouraged ongoing efforts ensure students complete financial aid applications and access available programs.

Nicole Giambusso, Director of Strategic Communications, began her presentation on the DHE's Go Higher brand and advertising campaign by acknowledging DHE's collaboration with the Executive Office of Education in this area of work.

Director Giambusso acknowledged that students continue to doubt whether college is affordable or within their financial reach, despite Massachusetts' expansion of state financial aid programming to make college free and affordable for many residents. She described the Go Higher campaign as a statewide effort launched in the Fall of 2025 to engage high school students and adult learners, clarify and promote state financial aid programs, and reinforce the message that higher education in the Commonwealth is affordable and possible. She explained that the campaign sought to consolidate all of the Commonwealth's nearly \$400 million in state

financial aid programs under a single “branding umbrella” to facilitate clear and efficient messaging between the Department and Massachusetts residents.

Director Giambusso She stated that the campaign, with ads in both English and Spanish, included both out-of-home advertising—including billboards, bus panels, and mall signage—as well as digital advertising and search advertising targeted to the primary audiences of high school students and potential adult learners. She also described the Department’s outreach efforts related to internet search terms and the substantial amount of internet search traffic among Massachusetts residents directed toward the Department’s “Go Higher” student-facing webpage. Director Giambusso reported that the campaign generated over 54 million impressions over approximately two months and that [mass.gov/gohigher](https://mass.gov/gohigher) received over 229,000 visits during the campaign period, indicating strong traffic to the webpage.

Director Giambusso further explained that, for the digital component, the Department reviewed data and targeted some ads to areas with room for growth in FAFSA completion, including Gateway Cities and rural communities in Massachusetts. She stated that these digital ads performed above industry benchmarks for engagement and impressions. Director Giambusso characterized the campaign as a strong brand introduction that generated meaningful engagement, and she further emphasized the importance of continued visibility and reinforcement so that residents associate Go Higher with affordability and opportunity in Massachusetts.

Director Giambusso connected the campaign to recommendations from the Advisory Council for the Advancement of Representation in Education (ACARE). She noted that ACARE emphasized proactive and ongoing communication about college-going, increasing exposure to higher education for K–12 students, and reengaging adult learners. Director Giambusso stated that the Go Higher campaign is one component of this broader work and referenced additional outreach efforts, including visits to high schools by Secretary Tutwiler, Commissioner Ortega, and DESE representatives to discuss affordability, financial aid, and FAFSA completion.

Director Giambusso concluded by turning the presentation over to Nyal Fuentes, College and Career Readiness Coordinator at the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), Mr. Fuentes presented on the new FAFSA Completion Dashboard, which is aimed at providing greater transparency and information to support improvement in FAFSA completion across Massachusetts.

Mr. Fuentes explained that the dashboard was built through a collaborative, interagency effort with the and expressed appreciation for staff members’ work toward advancing equity and access to higher education through this tool. He stated that Massachusetts continues to face significant college-going opportunity gaps for historically marginalized populations, including low-income, African-American and Latino students, English learners, and students with disabilities, and noted that one contributing factor is the need to mitigate affordability.

Mr. Fuentes explained that students must complete financial aid forms in order to access expanded state financial aid programs such as free community college and MASSGrant. Mr. Fuentes stated that DESE currently has school and district-facing FAFSA tools in the Edwin Analytics data warehouse that allow districts to view student-level information, which in turn allows them to perform targeted outreach to those students who have not yet completed the FAFSA.

Mr. Fuentes noted that publicly displayed dashboard figures will generally run 1-3% lower than actual completion rates because the process requires matching federal FAFSA information received through OSFA with DESE's Student Information Management System (SIMS) data in order to report by student group. He emphasized that the public-facing tool does not disclose personally identifiable information and that users would not be able to identify individual students.

Mr. Fuentes explained that, for this public-facing dashboard, DESE is presenting FAFSA completion using October enrollment as the denominator to display a consistent, stable student population for purposes of gap analysis. He reiterated that the dashboard is intended to support transparency and resource targeting and stated explicitly that it is not a "blame-and-shame" tool. Rather, it is designed to help the state, districts, schools, and colleges target supports and resources where the need is greatest, including through communications efforts like those described in the Go Higher campaign.

Mr. Fuentes stated that the dashboard is intended to be a near real-time tool updated twice per month, with approximately a one-week lag for data collection. Mr. Fuentes reported that, as of February 1, FAFSA completion for all students was 43.8%. He stated that Massachusetts ranked fifth in the country, including among states that require FAFSA completion.

Although year-to-year comparisons were not yet available, Mr. Fuentes explained that starting next year the tool would allow users to compare progress across the same date points (e.g., where the Commonwealth stood on March 15 of a prior year). He emphasized the importance of viewing gaps across student groups and highlighted the displayed difference between low-income and non-low-income completion rates, stating that the gap was approximately 25 percentage points and noting that low-income students often have the greatest opportunity for additional aid but complete the FAFSA at lower rates.

Mr. Fuentes then described several dashboard views and features. He explained that the dashboard includes a district-level overview, including districts with multiple high schools, and that users can select and view any district in the tool and are not restricted to their own. He provided an example of how college access partners or institutions could use the tool to better understand FAFSA completion patterns by student groups and collaborate with districts on targeted supports. He described a "High Flyers" view that displays the top 25 schools for a

selected student group and noted again that the tool is not intended as a ranking from one to all districts statewide. He also described a “Big Movers” view that allows users to examine growth in completion over selected time periods to evaluate the impact of focused efforts such as FAFSA events. He noted that analysts should consider context and small denominators when interpreting changes but stated that the view can help identify where strategies appear to be working.

Commissioner Noe Ortega stated that a key takeaway from the updates was that the Commonwealth, by and through the DHE-DESE partnership, is creating conditions to gather information at the secondary school level by leveraging data received when students take steps such as completing the FAFSA.

Commissioner Ortega stated that he and DESE Commissioner Martinez are committed to pursuing initiatives that encourage Massachusetts learners to apply for financial aid. He noted that when students - particularly students already participating in early college and related programs - realize college is affordable, many will take the next step. He underscored the importance of sustaining outreach efforts and urged that the Go Higher campaign must continue to emphasize affordability while informing students and families about available resources.

Commissioner Ortega explained that the Department’s GEAR UP program and its director Robert Dais have inspired broader efforts to target socio-economically disadvantaged high school populations in the context of financial aid form completion. He added that innovation and the use of technology are important for proactively messaging students and guiding them toward completing the application process. Commissioner Ortega stated that the Department has begun implementing pilots at a few schools, in partnership with external partners, using technology—including outreach through social media and other platforms students use—to foster completion of financial aid applications. He stated that the Department hopes to learn from these pilots and scale the work across additional high schools.

Commissioner Ortega also noted that the Graduation Requirement Council’s work on recommendations for new graduation requirements is proactively considering how to integrate postsecondary guidance, including application and financial aid, and stated that the Department is adapting to the current environment shaped by expanded financial aid investments and the need for proactive outreach.

Following the Commissioner’s Spotlight presentations, Chair Chris Gabrieli invited questions or comments for the Commissioner and the presenters. There being none, Chair Gabrieli thanked the presenters and noted the value of the Spotlight for deepening the Board’s understanding and for highlighting the close collaboration between DHE and DESE.

Chair Gabrieli then noted that, because it was Community College Day in Washington, D.C., the

Board would take agenda items out of order to address two Bristol Community College motions before public comments, so that institutional leaders from Bristol Community College could participate in the Washington, D.C. events.

### **III. BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION MOTIONS – Part A**

*List of documents used:*

[BHE 26-36](#) and [BHE 26-37](#)

Chair Gabrieli introduced the first motion, *BHE 26-36: Approval of Bristol Community College Strategic Plan*. He noted that Bristol Community College (BCC) President Sedgwick Harris was joining from Washington, D.C., and recognized April Lynch, Chief Strategy Officer, as also present.

Chair Gabrieli highlighted Bristol's emphasis on data and technology as a top strategic priority and asked President Harris to provide general framing for the strategic plan and describe the intent and implementation approach.

President Harris stated the strategic plan is entitled "Shaping the Future Together" and noted that the plan includes partnerships with business and industry and a commitment to accountability and student success outcomes.

President Harris stated the plan is organized around four pillars: student success (the leading priority), data and technology, innovation and transformation, and community affairs and development. He stated the pillars were developed to engage the full community and emphasized the importance of inclusion across Bristol's diverse population.

President Harris added that the data and technology pillar reflects BCC's focus on ensuring that institutional data are accurate and supported by a strong infrastructure for collecting and using data. He noted that BCC has a data dictionary to ensure shared definitions and consistent interpretation across the institution. He stated that elevating this work supports accuracy, agility, and responsiveness to opportunities identified through data, while maintaining accountability to community needs in Bristol County.

Board Member Bill Walczak commended the plan and noted that he observed changes in the strategic planning approach compared to prior plans. He stated the plan appeared responsive to community and economic needs.

Chair Gabrieli noted the plan's emphasis on student success and referenced the Statewide Commission on Higher Education Quality and Affordability's (CHEQA's) focus on evidence-based success programs. He asked President Harris to elaborate on the plan's case management approach. President Harris described strengthened student success services designed to support students from entry through completion, including wraparound services, upgraded academic advising, and career counseling integrated throughout the student experience. He stated the BCC aims to support students through transfer, workforce entry, and potential return for reskilling or retooling. He emphasized that BCC would remain a resource "every step of the

way.”

Vice Chair Harneen Chernow asked about adult learner re-enrollment, noting statewide attention to adult learners and demographic changes. President Harris stated that BCC’s average student age is 27 years and described adjustments made as adult enrollment increased, including growth associated with MassReconnect. He stated services were reorganized into wraparound services, orientation was restructured to welcome all students (including adult learners), and every student now receives an academic advisor, noting the importance of advising for BCC’s large part-time population. He stated these efforts contributed to improved persistence and retention and reiterated that the plan emphasizes flexible, skills-based, affordable pathways aligned with real-time labor market data to support employment and transfer momentum.

Hearing no further discussion, Chair Gabrieli called for a vote. On a motion duly made and seconded *BHE 26-36*

was approved unanimously by all 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 – Absent during vote
- Michael Hannigan – Yes
- Patrick Tutwiler, Secretary of Education – Yes
- Bill Walczak – Yes

**BHE 26-36      APPROVAL OF BRISTOL COMMUNITY COLLEGE STRATEGIC PLAN**

**VOTED**      The Board of Higher Education (Board) hereby approves the Bristol 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

Chair Gabrieli introduced *BHE 26-37: Bristol Community College Mission and Vision Statements* and noted that Board members had received the materials in advance. He stated that the item reflected meaningful revisions for the institution and indicated that he did not anticipate questions but invited Board members to raise any questions they may have.

Hearing no discussion, Chair Gabrieli called for a vote. On a motion duly made and seconded, BHE 26-37 was approved unanimously by all 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 – Absent during vote
- Michael Hannigan – Yes
- Patrick Tutwiler, Secretary of Education – Yes
- Bill Walczak – Yes

**BHE 26-37 APPROVAL OF BRISTOL COMMUNITY COLLEGE MISSION AND VISION STATEMENTS**

**VOTED** The Board of Higher Education hereby approves the request of Bristol Community College to revise the College’s mission and vision statement to read as follows:

**Mission Statement**

*Bristol Community College transforms lives through education and workforce training, empowering every learner to achieve success. Guided by purpose and connected by community, we foster innovation, lifelong learning, and contribute to the economic growth of our region.*

**Vision Statement Educating Minds.**

*Enriching Lives. Strengthening our Communities.*

The Board further authorizes the Commissioner to forward the same to the Secretary of Education, pursuant to Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 15A, Section 7.

**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

#### **IV. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

Chair Gabrieli stated that the Board would return to the regular order of business and proceed to Public Participation. He noted that eight individuals had requested to speak and asked speakers to observe the three-minute time limit. Chair Gabrieli then called the speakers in the following order: Joanna Gonsalves; Aruna Krishnamurthy; Polina Sabinin; Jim Leone; Navid Fozi; Anne Hird; Irina Seceleanu; and Max Page. Public comments are summarized below:

Massachusetts State College Association (MSCA) President Joanna Gonsalves: Ms. Gonsalves urged the Board to take a step back from the innovation degree proposal. She stated that revisions incorporated into the proposed final regulation 610 CMR 16.00 (Degree Granting Regulations for Pilot Proposals on Innovation) were minor and did not address educators' concerns regarding sub-120 credit bachelor's degrees. She argued that a reduced-credit degree could weaken state colleges' capacity to serve communities and undermine economic mobility, and she encouraged the Board to focus instead on investments in financial aid and student services that support timely degree completion.

Fitchburg State University faculty member Aruna Krishnamurthy: Ms. Krishnamurthy expressed her opposition to 90-credit bachelor's degree proposals from the perspective of student learning. She stated that reducing the number of required credits from 120 to 90 would likely eliminate general education and elective courses, limit cross-disciplinary learning, and narrow preparation for a diverse and global workforce. She expressed concern that the proposal could signal reduced expectations for first-generation and underserved students and warned that, in the context of enrollment pressures, a 90-credit degree could become a norm.

Bridgewater State University faculty member Polina Sabinin: Ms. Sabinin expressed opposition to sub-120 credit bachelor's degrees because they would reduce general education and liberal arts experiences that build critical thinking, communication, creativity, and problem solving. She stated that fourth-year experiences such as capstones and research prepare students for evolving labor markets, including the impacts of artificial intelligence, and cautioned that reduced credit degrees would divert faculty time away from developing new courses and pathways responsive to emerging needs.

Bridgewater State University faculty member Jim Leone: Mr. Leone urged the Board to reject the 90-credit degree proposal. He argued that a reduced-credit bachelor's degree would weaken academic rigor and insufficiently prepare graduates for complex workforce demands, including roles in health and public health. He cautioned that reduced undergraduate preparation could disproportionately affect students who may not have access to graduate education.

Bridgewater State University faculty member Navid Fozil: Mr. Fozil argued that reduced credit degrees would undermine equity-focused commitments and diminish students' ability to engage in high-impact practices such as research, conference participation, honors, and study abroad programs. He stated that these practices require strong foundations and sustained relationship-building over time, and he warned that reducing credits could reinforce race and class boundaries and erode progress toward expanding access to these opportunities.

Bridgewater State University's Anne Hird: Ms. Hird stated that a reduced-credit bachelor's degree could negatively affect teacher preparation and recruitment amid existing shortages. She noted that licensure requirements are difficult to fit within four years and that the practicum/student teaching semester creates financial burdens that already lead some students to leave the pathway. She expressed concern that a three-year degree option in other fields would make it harder to recruit into teaching and could contribute to shortages and reliance on emergency licensure.

Bridgewater State University faculty member Irina Seceleanu: Ms. Seceleanu expressed opposition to reduced credit degree program pilots amid demographic pressures and a changing workforce. She argued that creating a pathway toward authorizing 90-credit bachelor's degrees would incentivize colleges to shorten academic programs to remain competitive, potentially eroding standards and disrupting coordinated planning across the system. She stated that multiple versions of a bachelor's degree could create confusion for employers and graduate programs and lead to additional credential requirements, with inequitable impacts on first-generation and low-income students.

Massachusetts Teachers Association (MTA) President Max Page: Mr. Page expressed opposition to reduced credit degrees and opined that affordability should be addressed through continued investment in high-quality, debt-free public higher education. He urged the Board to maintain full and robust college experiences and emphasized the importance of sustaining public higher education amid federal challenges, offering continued partnership on affordability and access.

Chair Gabrieli thanked the group for their comments and for staying within the allotted time. Chair Gabrieli then proceeded to the next agenda item.

## **V. ACCEPTANCE OF MINUTES**

Chair Gabrieli requested a motion to bundle and approve the minutes from the following BHE Meetings: November 25, 2025, and December 9, 2025. On a motion duly made and seconded, both set of minutes were approved unanimously by all Board 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
- Michael Hannigan – Yes
- Patrick Tutwiler, Secretary of Education – Yes
- Bill Walczak – Yes

## **VI. REMARKS**

### A. Board of Higher Education Chair

Chair Gabrieli shared brief remarks emphasizing a theme of from the Board retreat: strengthening alignment across K–12 and higher education, including through collaboration with DESE Commissioner Pedro Martinez. He noted that while the sectors operate under different governance structures and systems, they share responsibility for serving Massachusetts students, and he expressed appreciation for the growing collaboration between DHE and DESE, including the day's presentations. Chair Gabrieli highlighted Early College as a key example. He also noted additional areas for cross-sector work, including teacher preparation and stronger longitudinal data systems. Chair Gabrieli then turned to Secretary Tutwiler for remarks.

### B. Secretary of Education

After acknowledging the one hundredth anniversary of Black History Month, Secretary of Education Patrick Tutwiler highlighted key higher education investments in the Governor's FY27 budget, including \$37 million toward maintaining free community college; \$103 million for MASSGrant Plus expansion and other financial aid supports; and \$38 million for student SUCCESS programming. He emphasized that access and affordability must be paired with support that drives completion, and he concluded by expressing appreciation for the Board's partnership.

### C. Presidents

#### [State University Segmental Report](#)

Westfield State University President Linda Thompson delivered updates on behalf of the State

Universities. She focused on the Governor's FY27 budget and expressed appreciation for the advocacy of Secretary Tutwiler, Commissioner Ortega, and DHE staff President Thompson emphasized that the State Universities' top priority is the full funding and annualization of collective bargaining obligations and noted that the Governor's spending plan reflects these costs in base campus appropriations. She also underscored the importance of continued financial aid investments and stated that the State Universities would advocate for legislative support for additional public higher education priorities referenced in her report, including initiatives supporting student retention and affordability.

### [Community College Segmental Report](#)

North Shore Community College President Bill Heineman delivered updates on behalf of the Community Colleges. He noted that leaders from all 15 Massachusetts Community Colleges were in Washington, D.C. for the National Legislative Summit to advocate for federal priorities affecting students and institutions, including Workforce Pell. President Heineman highlighted continued strong student demand associated with free community college and emphasized the importance of pairing increased enrollment with the supports needed for student success, including the SUCCESS Program, modern learning environments, adequately supported faculty and staff, and programs aligned to workforce and student goals. He also expressed support for the proposed final "innovation regulations" (610 CMR 16.00) presently before the Board and praised the regulatory framework's inherent flexibility.

#### D. Student Advisory Council

Student Member Hannigan provided an update on behalf of the Student Advisory Council (SAC). He summarized topics discussed at the SAC meeting held February 5, 2026, including Open Educational Resources (OER) free or low-cost course materials that faculty can adapt for instruction. He stated that DHE staff presented on efforts to expand OER adoption and noted that OER has saved students tens of millions of dollars. He added that OER remains important for community college students even with textbook stipends, because lower material costs can translate into more funds available for basic needs.

Student Member Hannigan also reported ongoing concerns about student access to hot meals on campus, particularly amid vendor disruptions across multiple community colleges. He stated that these disruptions exacerbate food insecurity and shared that 38% of students across Massachusetts public colleges and universities experience food insecurity. He emphasized the importance of including students in discussions about dining service disruptions and highlighted the connection between basic needs and student success.

#### C. Commissioner

Commissioner Ortega noted that the Governor's House 2 (H.2) budget filing includes continued investment in financial aid and stated that the Healey-Driscoll Administration has made significant investments over several years, including effectively doubling financial aid for students. He noted that students earning an associate or bachelor's degree can earn \$20,000–\$30,000 more three years after completion than students with only a high school diploma. He emphasized that this earnings premium depends on completion and highlighted continued investment in student success in H.2, stating that funding has increased from \$28 million to \$38 million, with an additional \$10 million for UMass student success supports. Commissioner Ortega stated that the Department will continue monitoring budget developments as the process advances.

Commissioner Ortega then turned to federal developments, noting that the Department continues to monitor federal actions that may affect campuses and students. He asked DHE's Chief Legal Counsel Dena Papanikolaou and Deputy Commissioner for Policy Michael Dannenberg to provide relevant updates.

Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou stated that she and her staff continued to work closely with representatives from the Massachusetts Attorney General's Office (AGO) to support pending and anticipated litigation. While there continues to be much activity in this area, she reported on three developments:

- First, she highlighted pending litigation involving the federally-funded TRIO grant program and reported that the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia recently found that the U.S. Department of Education (USED) failed to follow the law in its denial and discontinuation of TRIO program grants. The Court granted a preliminary injunction requiring the Department to reconsider its decisions and potentially reinstate discontinued grants while the case progresses. The Massachusetts AGO helped lead the filing of an amicus brief in that case along with 21 other states, with close coordination with counsel for the impacted public higher education institutions in the Commonwealth.
- Next, Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou shared that the federal administration dropped its appeal of a Maryland federal court decision striking down OCR's recent anti-DEIA guidance, effectively ending USED's ability to implement that specific OCR guidance document. She noted Massachusetts will continue to align with the Commonwealth's DEIA guidance issued jointly by Governor Healey, Attorney General Campbell, EOE, DHE, and DESE.
- Finally, Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou noted with appreciation and summarized the Healey-Driscoll Administration's January 29<sup>th</sup> Executive Order and accompanied, filed legislation related to related immigration activities and protecting undocumented residents' access to schools, hospitals, and churches. Relatedly, Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou highlighted the work of DHE Campus Safety Advisor Amanda Robbins who continues to work closely with the Massachusetts Office for Refugees and Immigrants (ORI), to help

coordinate offerings of ORI's support "Know Your Rights" trainings for students, faculty, and staff. In addition, the DHE continues to support our campuses by sharing best practices as they maintain and update their policies and protocols for campus employees with regard to interactions with federal immigration officers as anticipated and called for by the Governor's Executive Order.

Next, Deputy Commissioner of Policy Michael Dannenberg shared updates related to federal policy developments, and focused on accreditation, implementation of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, and federal FY2026 education appropriations (school year 2026–2027). He noted that accreditation is essential to institutional eligibility for federal student aid and stated that the federal administration plans to launch a negotiated rulemaking process on accreditation regulations in April and May of 2026. Key areas that the DHE is monitoring in this regard include recognition of emerging and existing accreditors, heightened attention to student outcomes, and potential efforts to advance an ideological agenda through accreditation, including issues related to DEI-like programs and viewpoint diversity. Deputy Commissioner Dannenberg then summarized the One Big Beautiful Bill Act and its impact on Workforce Pell, the new caps placed on federal student loan access and availability beginning July 1, 2026, and changes to loan repayment options that would result in borrowers paying about \$3,000 more per year on average. Finally, Deputy Commissioner Dannenberg reported that Congress rejected the administration's discretionary education budget proposal and that the maximum Pell Grant was maintained at \$7,395, with GEAR UP and TRIO funding also maintained compared to the prior fiscal year.

Chair Gabrieli thanked Commissioner Ortega and expressed appreciation for the federal updates from Chief Legal Counsel Dena Papanikolaou and Deputy Commissioner of Policy Michael Dannenberg. Chair Gabrieli then proceeded to the motions section of the agenda.

## **VII. BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION MOTIONS – Part B**

*List of documents used:*

[BHE 26-35 FY27](#); [BHE 25-38](#); [BHE 26-39](#); [BHE 26-40](#); [BHE 26-41](#); [BHE 26-42](#); [BHE 26-42 Presentation](#)

Chair Gabrieli introduced motion, *BHE 26-35: FY27 Board Meeting Schedule*.

Hearing no discussion, Chair Gabrieli called for a vote. On a motion duly made and seconded, BHE 26-35 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
- Michael Hannigan – Yes
- Patrick Tutwiler, Secretary of Education – Yes
- Bill Walczak – Yes

**BHE 26-35 BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION FISCAL YEAR 2027 MEETING  
(ACADEMIC YEAR 2026- 2027).**

**VOTED** Motion adopted by the BHE on 2/10/2026.

**Authority** Massachusetts General Laws c. 15A, § 4(f); By-Laws of the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education, Article II.

**Contact** Constantia T. Papanikolaou, Chief Legal Counsel Nicole Johnson,  
Director of Board and Community Relations

Chair Gabrieli next introduced *BHE 26-38, Approval of Letter of Intent of MassBay Community College to Award The Associate of Science In Diagnostic Medical Sonography and Authorization for Fast Track Review.*

Chair Gabrieli noted that Lynne Davis, Ed.D., Dean of Health Sciences, and Courtney B. Jackson, Ph.D., Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost, were available to respond to questions. He commended the program for its hybrid format and flexible scheduling, which would benefit working adults and expressed appreciation for the program’s responsiveness to the needs of an evolving student population.

Hearing no further discussion, Chair Gabrieli called for a vote. On a motion duly made and seconded, BHE 26-38 was approved unanimously by all 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
- Michael Hannigan – Yes
- Patrick Tutwiler, Secretary of Education – Yes

- Bill Walczak – Yes

**BHE 26-38      APPROVAL OF LETTER OF INTENT OF MASSBAY COMMUNITY COLLEGE TO AWARD THE ASSOCIATE OF SCIENCE IN DIAGNOSTIC MEDICAL SONOGRAPHY AND AUTHORIZATION FOR FAST TRACK REVIEW**

**VOTED**            The Board of Higher Education (BHE) has evaluated the Letter of Intent of MassBay Community College to award the Associate of Science in Diagnostic Medical Sonography 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.

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

Chair Gabrieli introduced the next motion, *BHE 26-39, Approval of Letter of Intent of Roxbury Community College to Award an Associate of Applied Science in Building Automation Systems and authorization for fast-track review.*

Chair Gabrieli noted that members of the Roxbury Community College (RCC) team were present and invited Board questions or comments. Chair Gabrieli stated that he was impressed by the program’s connection to industry needs and the specificity of skills identified for building automation systems. He also noted the relevance of the program to economic activity in the Roxbury area.

RCC staff explained that that the proposed AAS in Building Automation Systems builds on an existing 450-hour non-degree certificate and formalizes it into a credit-bearing pathway that expands access to financial aid and supports long-term sustainability beyond grant funding.

Hearing no further discussion, Chair Gabrieli called for a vote. On a motion duly made and seconded, BHE 26-39 was approved unanimously by all 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
- Michael Hannigan – Yes
- Patrick Tutwiler, Secretary of Education – Yes
- Bill Walczak – Yes

**BHE 26-39      APPROVAL OF LETTER OF INTENT OF ROXBURY COMMUNITY COLLEGE TO AWARD THE ASSOCIATE OF APPLIED SCIENCE IN BUILDING AUTOMATION SYSTEMS AND AUTHORIZATION FOR FAST TRACK REVIEW**

**VOTED**      The Board of Higher Education (BHE) has evaluated the Letter of Intent of Roxbury Community College to award the Associate of Applied Science in Building Automation Systems 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.

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

After the vote, Chair Gabrieli congratulated the Roxbury Community College team. Kat James, Director of the Center for Smart Building Technology, stated that the proposed AAS in Building Automation Systems builds on an existing 450-hour non-degree certificate and formalizes it into a credit-bearing pathway that expands access to financial aid and supports long-term sustainability beyond grant funding. Hillel Sims, Associate Vice President of Academic Affairs, noted strong partner interest and stated that demand for these roles is expected to grow in Massachusetts, and Chair Gabrieli stated that the Board looked forward to seeing the program grow.

Chair Gabrieli next introduced the motion, *BHE 26-40, MSCBA FY27 Rent Certificate Approval*

Chair Gabrieli noted that MSCBA staff were available, along with Matthew Cole, Deputy Commissioner for Administration, Finance & Operations, to answer any questions, and he confirmed that Member Bill Walczak serves on the MSCBA board. Member Walczak commented on the importance of residence halls in student recruitment and the need for appropriate maintenance and reasonable rent schedules, and he recommended approval. Deputy Commissioner for Administration, Finance, and Operations Matthew Cole concurred, noting MSCBA’s strong work and the importance of housing for the State Universities.

Hearing no further discussion, Chair Gabrieli called for a vote. On a motion duly made and seconded, BHE 26-40 was approved unanimously by all 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
- Michael Hannigan – Yes
- Patrick Tutwiler, Secretary of Education – Yes
- Bill Walczak – Yes

**BHE 26-40      APPROVAL OF FISCAL YEAR 2027 RENT SCHEDULE AND  
OPERATING BUDGETS MASSACHUSETTS STATE COLLEGE  
BUILDING AUTHORITY**

**VOTED**      The Board of Higher Education hereby approves the attached Fiscal Year 2027 Schedule of Proposed Rents and Operating Budget for the Massachusetts State College Building Authority (MSCBA) and State University Residence Halls, effective July 1, 2026, 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 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

Chair Gabrieli introduced the next motion *BHE 26-41, Approval of Commissioner's Annual Performance Evaluation*

Chair Gabrieli noted that the Board had received both the Commissioner's self-review and the Chair's draft evaluation as prepared with input from Board members, including feedback gathered at the Board retreat. Chair Gabrieli stated that the evaluation follows the structure of the Board's goals and the Department's strategic framework.

Chair Gabrieli summarized the evaluation as recognizing a strong year of performance by the

Commissioner and the Department against the Board's goals. He noted continued emphasis on the Board's equity work as the overarching framework, supported by the Department's four strategic priorities. Chair Gabrieli referenced accomplishments discussed in the evaluation, including progress on launching the innovation effort; securing a major grant to support both pilot programs and central capacity; advancing the Department's work on economic mobility; and continued implementation efforts related to financial aid and student success. He also noted that the evaluation commended the Commissioner's engagement with the Board, institutions, and stakeholders, and emphasized the importance of aligning internal and external resources to advance ambitious goals, particularly in constrained budget environments. Chair Gabrieli also noted that the evaluation encourages broadening the content and scope of the review for 2026.

Chair Gabrieli then invited discussion of the Commissioner's annual evaluation.

Board members offered remarks in support of Commissioner Ortega's performance and leadership. Member Danielle Allen expressed appreciation for the strategic framework structure and progress toward strategic goals. Member Lisa Battaglini stated that the evaluation was a pleasure to read and highlighted Commissioner Ortega's collaboration, insight, and the value of the Commissioner's Spotlights in providing clarity on priorities and progress. Member Veronica Conforme thanked Commissioner Ortega and remarked on the momentum and progress achieved during the past year.

Member Walczak supported the recommended review and commended the value of Board retreats in deepening shared understanding of goals and progress. Member Walczak also commented on the importance of collaboration between DHE and DESE to ensure students are prepared for higher education-level work, citing examples such as remediation needs and early college completion. He emphasized the value of data on economic mobility while noting that those outcomes depend on completion, and he urged attention to high school graduation standards that measure readiness for postsecondary work.

Vice Chair Chernow expressed support for Commissioner Ortega and acknowledged the leadership team's expertise. She stated that the Commissioner's Spotlights help ground the Board's work in equity and strategic priorities, and she noted interest in the CHEQA Commission and issues related to recruitment and retention of faculty and staff. Secretary Tutwiler also expressed support for the evaluation and appreciation for the opportunity to work with Commissioner Ortega and his team. Student Member Hannigan thanked Commissioner Ortega on behalf of students, noted the on-the-ground impact of affordability initiatives including MassReconnect and its expansion, and noted that the Commissioner also identifies areas where additional work is needed. Member Burns thanked Commissioner Ortega for his work with institutional partners, including the University of Massachusetts system.

Hearing no further discussion, Chair Gabrieli called for a vote. On a motion duly made and seconded, BHE 26-41 was approved unanimously by all 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
- Michael Hannigan – Yes
- Patrick Tutwiler, Secretary of Education – Yes
- Bill Walczak – Yes

**BHE 26-41      APPROVAL OF COMMISSIONER’S ANNUAL PERFORMANCE EVALUATION**

**VOTED**            The Board of Higher Education hereby approves the attached Annual Performance Evaluation of Commissioner Noe Ortega.

The Board commends Commissioner Ortega and his team for their accomplishments and work, and thanks the Commissioner for his service.

**Authority**        Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 15A, Section 6.

**Contact**         Constantia T. Papanikolaou, Chief Legal Counsel

Chair Gabrieli next introduced the final motion *BHE 26-42, Approval and Adoption of 610 CMR 16.00: Degree Granting Regulations for Pilot Proposals on Innovation*, which if approved, would establish a framework for the Board to consider, advance, and evaluate pilot proposals from institutions of higher education offer a program or initiative that may otherwise be inconsistent with one or more specific BHE regulatory requirements related to degree-granting authority.

Chair Gabrieli noted that the Board had discussed the subject of pathways to innovative pilot proposals for more than a year, beginning with a significant discussion in December 2024, and that the Board’s work progressed from conceptual discussion to consideration of the regulatory framework needed to evaluate pilot proposals. He stated that while the regional accreditor New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE) has authority to approve proposals outside normal rules on a pilot basis, the Massachusetts BHE lacked similar authority under present state degree-granting regulations. He noted that this led the Board to develop proposed regulation 610 CMR 16, a draft which was unanimously approved by BHE back in October of 2025.

Chair Gabrieli stated that the draft regulations were circulated for public comment and that the final proposed regulations before the Board included technical changes but no material changes

from the October draft. He emphasized that the Board was not voting on any specific institutional proposal that day, but rather on whether to adopt a regulation that would allow institutions to submit pilot proposals for Board consideration in the future.

Chair Gabrieli stated that the regulations are intended to balance the Board's consumer protection responsibilities with the goal of enabling innovation, such as ensuring students are informed and protected and that outcome data regarding employment and graduate school access are collected.

Commissioner Ortega stated that, in preparation for the Board's vote, DHE's Legal and Academic Affairs teams designed a regulatory framework that allows the Board to act on a variety of potential innovation pilot proposals from campuses. He acknowledged that the concept of reduced credit bachelor's degrees is not the proposed regulations' primary focus, but it has nevertheless been a focal point of innovation regulation-related public discourse. Deputy Commissioner Dannenberg was asked to provide a brief landscape update on three-year and sub-120 credit degree activity. Deputy Commissioner Dannenberg noted that three-year degrees have existed internationally for decades and in the United States students have traditionally completed a 120-credit bachelor's degree in three years through accelerated pathways (e.g., AP credit, heavier course loads, summer study).

Deputy Commissioner Dannenberg stated that several U.S. accreditors have already approved or authorized sub-120 or three-year degree programs, including Middle States, the Northwest Commission, NECHE, and the Higher Learning Commission. He noted that Middle States and the Northwest Commission do not set a minimum program length but rather evaluate programs based on standards such as rigor, coherence, learning outcomes, employment outcomes, and alignment with institutional mission. In comparison, NECHE requires an applied bachelor's designation, consumer disclosures about acceptance by employers and graduate programs, outcomes tracking, a minimum of 90 credits (including at least 30 in the major), an appropriate mix of general education/major/electives, and "stackability" to a 120-credit pathway without loss of credit.

Deputy Commissioner Dannenberg also highlighted reduced credit initiatives at the state level, noting that Indiana requires each public institution to offer at least one three-year degree and to review programs for potential three-year options, and that Ohio requires each public institution to offer at least one three-year degree by 2027–2028. He noted that while sub-120 programs remain limited relative to the number of four-year institutions nationally, they have become increasingly common.

Commissioner Ortega emphasized that this environmental scan was intended as a brief landscape update to illustrate the level of national activity as the Commonwealth develops a regulation that would allow the Board to consider a campus's application for a reduced credit degree program if one is submitted.

Chair Gabrieli invited Board discussion prior to the vote and emphasized that the regulatory framework of 610 CMR 16.00 would create a pathway for a range of innovation pilots beyond

sub-120 credit proposals, though public comment has predominately focused on that particular type of innovative pilot proposal. He further suggested that the regulatory framework would enable campuses to build evidence related to pilot proposal effectiveness and added that the Board's approach to innovation should be to neither assume all innovations are beneficial nor prevent high-quality, campus-driven proposals from being considered. Chair Gabrieli noted that public comments received reflected a range of views, including feedback that the proposed regulations were either too burdensome or too lenient.

Vice Chair Chernow thanked the Department for the thoughtful approach and the series of presentations provided over the prior year and a half. She stated that her primary concern is the equity impact of sub-120 degrees, including whether they could contribute to a "two-tiered system" in which students with fewer financial resources are steered toward shorter degrees while more affluent students can still pursue a four-year experience. Vice Chair Chernow emphasized the importance of evaluating access, retention, completion, and return on investment through an equity lens and noted that outcomes cannot be fully known in advance. She also emphasized the importance of distinguishing three-year pathways from reducing credit requirements, stating that the current policy discussion is fundamentally about changing the number of credits required for a degree.

Student Advisor Rosenkrantz added that the Board should consider student perspectives, including the views of high school seniors and their families, as well as workforce perceptions. She noted the importance of understanding whether a student with a three-year degree would be viewed as equally qualified as a student with a four-year degree.

Hearing no further discussion, Chair Gabrieli called for a vote. On a motion duly made and seconded, BHE 26-42 was approved through a roll call vote, as follows:

- Chris Gabrieli, Chair – Yes
- Danielle Allen – Yes
- Lisa Battaglino – No
- Mary Burns – Yes
- Harneen Chernow, Vice-Chair – No
- Ann Christensen – Yes
- Veronica Conforme – Yes
- Michael Hannigan – Yes
- Patrick Tutwiler, Secretary of Education – Yes
- Bill Walczak – Yes

Chair Gabrieli stated that the vote reflected eight votes in favor and asked Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou whether the motion carried. Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou confirmed that, under statute, seven votes were needed for any action of the BHE to pass; accordingly, the motion carried.

**BHE 26-42      APPROVAL AND ADOPTION OF 610 CMR 16.00: DEGREE GRANTING REGULATIONS FOR PILOT PROPOSALS ON INNOVATION**

**VOTED**      The Board of Higher Education (“Board” or “BHE”) having solicited and reviewed public comment in accordance with the Administrative Procedure Act, M.G.L. c. 30A, § 3, hereby adopts the following final regulation 610 CMR 16.00: Degree Granting Regulations for Pilot Proposals on Innovation, as set forth in Attachment A.

**Authority**      M.G.L. c. 15A, § 9(a) and (b); M.G.L. c. 69, § 30 et seq., and M.G.L. c. 30A, § 2; 950 CMR 20.00.

**Contact**      Constantia T. Papanikolaou, Chief Legal Counsel Richard Riccardi, Deputy Commissioner for Academic Affairs and Student Success

Chair Gabrieli noted that the decision was difficult for some members and stated that the Board’s role as a public deliberative body is to address challenging issues through an open process. He added that if an institution submits a proposal under the regulation in the future, the Board expects further discussion. Chair Gabrieli thanked Board members and staff for their attention and preparation and then requested a motion to adjourn.

**VIII.    OTHER BUSINESS**

None

**IX.      ADJOURNMENT**

The meeting was adjourned at 12:40 p.m.

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