

MASSACHUSETTS BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

May 19, 2026
10:00 a.m.
Hybrid Meeting

Meeting Minutes

A hybrid meeting of the Board of Higher Education (BHE or Board) was held on Tuesday, May 19, 2026, in person at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design, 621 Huntington Avenue, Boston, MA, Design and Media Center, Huntington Studio (3rd Floor), and remotely via teleconference (Zoom).

The following Board Members were present:

Chris Gabrieli, Chair
Harneen Chernow, Vice Chair
Danielle Allen¹
Lisa Battaglino
Mary Burns²
Ann Christensen³
Veronica Conforme⁴
Alex Cortez⁵
Michael Hannigan, Voting Student Member, Community College Segment⁶
Bob LePage, Secretary of Education Designee
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:
None

I. CALL TO ORDER

Board Chair Chris Gabrieli called the regular meeting of the Board to order at 10:08 a.m. Roll call

¹ Participated remotely, via Zoom; Departed at 12:57pm.

² Participated remotely, via Zoom.

³ Participated remotely, via Zoom.

⁴ Participated remotely, via Zoom.

⁵ Participated remotely, via Zoom.

⁶ Participated remotely, via Zoom; Departed at 1:02 pm.

attendance was taken (see above for attendance roster).

II. WELCOME FROM PRESIDENT GRANT

Massachusetts College of Art and Design President Mary Grant welcomed the Board to MassArt, thanked the MassArt and Department staff who supported the meeting, and noted that the visit was occurring during a busy commencement week for the College. President Grant presented a brief video overview and summarized MassArt's history, academic offerings, partnerships, community engagement, and campus-planning work. She concluded by thanking MassArt trustees, staff, and colleagues from across the Commonwealth and invited attendees to see the campus.

III. COMMISSIONER'S SPOTLIGHT

Documents Used:

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

Commissioner Noe Ortega thanked President Grant for hosting the Board at MassArt and introduced the Commissioner's Spotlight, which would focus more specifically on innovation and how the Commonwealth can leverage innovation in service of the Board's broader goals. Commissioner Ortega stated that the presentation would address innovation as a Board priority, the Department's strategy and capacity-building work, early execution related to cooperative education, and future work. He then introduced Senior Deputy Commissioner Jose Luis Santos and Dr. Danielle Rowdy, Chief Innovation Officer, as presenters.

Senior Deputy Commissioner Santos stated that the Department is working to operationalize the Board's innovation priority, and described it as focused on reducing barriers for learners, improving mobility across systems and segments, and supporting a public higher education ecosystem that is more responsive to how students move through education and work.

Senior Deputy Commissioner Santos identified several guiding principles for the work, including the need for dedicated capacity, a system-focused approach that enables conditions through policy and operational flexibility, sustainable partnerships, and evidence-based practice. He stated that the Department's role is to help create conditions for promising ideas to move from pilot to scale in ways that improve outcomes for learners across the Commonwealth.

Senior Deputy Commissioner Santos discussed the development of the Department's Higher Education Innovation Hub. He stated that, after the Board adopted innovation as a strategic priority, the Department secured a \$2.1 million grant from Axim Collaborative to launch the Hub. He described the Hub as a statewide effort to pilot, evaluate, and scale promising practices

that improve learner outcomes and strengthen institutional capacity. He noted that the Hub's early work has focused on career-connected learning and learner mobility because those areas connect closely to economic mobility, student success, and workforce needs.

Senior Deputy Commissioner Santos introduced Dr. Rowdy as the Department's inaugural Chief Innovation Officer, who noted that the Innovation Hub team is focused on identifying, supporting, and helping to scale innovation already occurring within the public higher education ecosystem. Dr. Rowdy described the Massachusetts Cooperative Education Initiative as one of the Hub's first central projects. She explained that the initiative is focused on expanding access to work-based, career-connected learning through four-to-eight-month, full-time, paid work experiences aligned with students' majors and administered by their institutions. She stated that cooperative education can be integrated into students' academic pathways and can have significant impact on students' earnings after college and over time. Dr. Rowdy noted that the initiative was announced on April 6 with the Lieutenant Governor and the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education, and that Bridgewater State University, Framingham State University, and MassArt received grants to design co-op program supports for implementation in the Fall of 2026. She also stated that the Department is planning for a second cohort of institutions.

Dr. Rowdy stated that the Innovation Hub is not intended to permanently own projects, but rather to support promising work, identify lessons and best practices, and help initiatives grow beyond the Hub where appropriate. She reviewed three areas of focus for the Hub: connected learning (career-connected learning as well as broader social, community, and civic connections between students' education and the world around them); integrated pathways (helping learners move through higher education at different points in their lives, including through connections between public education and workforce reskilling); and innovation capacity (work to strengthen the Department's and institutions' ability to support and sustain innovation).

Dr. Rowdy also highlighted early conversations around credit-transfer pathways and simplified or direct admissions. She noted that Massachusetts has been a leader in associate-to-baccalaureate pathway mapping but stated that new approaches may help the Commonwealth better understand and support student movement across institutions. She also stated that, as the Commonwealth expands Early College programming, sees more students using state aid at community colleges, and responds to private institutional closures, more learners are accumulating credits and need clearer and less burdensome pathways to use those credits effectively. Regarding simplified (direct) admissions, Dr. Rowdy stated that many Massachusetts high school graduates who enroll in college remain in-state and that the Commonwealth should consider how to make public higher education pathways easier for students to access.

Member Bill Walczak asked whether the Department would provide regular reports on the

Innovation Hub's work. Dr. Rowdy stated that the Hub plans to provide regular updates, including a newsletter, formal updates, and potential report-outs that share best practices, results, and lessons learned from initiatives. Member Walczak also asked how many innovative ideas could be brought forward and whether they must come from colleges or universities. Dr. Rowdy stated that the Hub is open to engaging with ideas that are brought forward, while noting that the Hub's direct involvement will depend on alignment with its framework and the potential impact on the public higher education system.

Vice Chair Harneen Chernow thanked the presenters and stated that she was interested in how innovative projects move from pilot to scale, including how grant-funded initiatives can become part of the broader higher education ecosystem if outcomes are positive. Dr. Rowdy stated that the Hub is considering sustainability at the front end of its work, including the funding and staffing needed for initiatives to continue after Innovation Hub involvement.

Chair Gabrieli stated that Early College provides an example of an innovation that has moved from small scale toward significant scale in Massachusetts. He noted that the Commonwealth now has data on Early College's impact and has set an ambitious goal for future growth. Member Walczak asked whether the Hub would consider ideas that do not already have funding attached. Dr. Rowdy stated that the Axim Collaborative grant provides some catalytic funding and that the Hub can also help institutions identify other potential sources of support, including grants, foundations, partnerships, and other investors.

Chair Gabrieli noted that the Board's Strategic Higher Education Finance (SHEF) Framework included innovation as a state-funded function and stated that the Board and Department will need to continue making the case that targeted, flexible funding through the Department, in partnership with institutions, can support large-scale change. Assistant Secretary Bob LePage encouraged the Department to frame cooperative education and related work within broader workforce and talent conversations, including connections to economic development, work-based learning, apprenticeship, and health and human services talent pipelines. Senior Deputy Commissioner Santos agreed that cross-secretariat collaboration, including with labor and industry, will be important. Dr. Rowdy stated that the Innovation Hub will support aligned work across agencies where those efforts advance higher education goals.

IV. BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION MOTIONS – Part A

List of documents used:

[BHE 26-57](#) and [BHE 26-58](#)

Chair Gabrieli introduced the first motion, *BHE 26-57: Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts Presidential Appointment*. Commissioner Ortega further highlighted the motion, acknowledged the work of the search committee and the institution, and invited MCLA Board of Trustees Chair

Buffy Lord to summarize the search process.

MCLA Board of Trustees Chair Lord stated that the MCLA presidential search began in September 2025 and followed BHE guidelines, with an emphasis on shared governance, transparency, and meaningful engagement with campus and community stakeholders. She stated that the search committee included representation from each campus constituency, as well as the Department of Higher Education, trustees, faculty, alumni, students, and members of each union segment, and was assisted by the search firm WittKieffer. She also confirmed that the Search Committee participated in trainings on open meeting law, public records law, and implicit bias.

Chair Lord reported that after a thorough search process involving 102 candidates, 10 semi-finalist interviews, and 4 finalist interviews the MCLA Board of Trustees voted overwhelmingly on April 23 to recommend Dr. Diana Rogers-Adkinson as the next president. The comprehensive selection process included campus-wide forums, finalist interviews with state officials, and community feedback before authorizing contract negotiations with the chosen candidate. Chair Lord stated that the trustees were particularly focused on Dr. Rogers-Adkinson's ability to articulate the importance of liberal arts education, not only for career readiness but also for building stronger communities and a better democracy. . She also noted Dr. Rogers-Adkinson's significant experience on campuses and within a larger system through her work with the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE). Chair Lord stated that the trustees believe Dr. Rogers-Adkinson has the qualities needed to lead MCLA into the future, bring its strategic plan to fruition, and position MCLA as a leader in the public liberal arts segment.

Commissioner Ortega stated that he and Member Battaglino had interviewed Dr. Rogers-Adkinson and that he had overlapped briefly with her work in PASSHE before coming to Massachusetts. He stated that she came highly regarded by individuals with whom he had worked closely and that the interview identified someone with the passion, skillset, and experience to hit the ground running. Member Battaglino stated that Dr. Rogers-Adkinson was poised and energized about moving the campus forward and that it was refreshing and exciting to hear her ideas and understand the experience she would bring to MCLA.

Dr. Rogers-Adkinson thanked Chair Lord, the trustees, and the Search Committee for their confidence in her ability to lead MCLA. She also thanked President Birge for 10 years of stewardship, stating that he provided a legacy to build on, a strategic plan to help launch, and preparation that would allow her to hit the ground running. Dr. Rogers-Adkinson noted that her first teaching job as an undergraduate had been in Massachusetts and stated that the opportunity to come full circle, return to Massachusetts, and be near family was a holistically wonderful moment.

Chair Gabrieli asked Dr. Rogers-Adkinson about lessons from her experience with campuses in more remote areas and with the formation of Commonwealth University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Rogers-Adkinson stated that the biggest lesson she learned was the importance of deep

listening to understand fears, anxiety, and perceptions of loss of identity and then turn those anxieties into catalyst points for empowering faculty. She described the experience of rebuilding a university curriculum in a year and a half, including coursework, majors, minors, concentrations, and general education. She stated that leadership involved setting parameters, identifying the musts and limitations, and then returning the work to the faculty so they could embrace and collectively own the opportunity. She said the most important lesson was understanding what constituents are thinking in order to build toward the future.

Hearing no further discussion, Chair Gabrieli called for a vote. On a motion duly made and seconded *BHE 26-57* 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
- Alex Cortez – Yes
- Michael Hannigan – Yes
- Bob LePage, Secretary of Education Designee – Yes
- Bill Walczak – Yes

BHE 26-57 MASSACHUSETTS COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS PRESIDENTIAL APPOINTMENT

VOTED The Board of Higher Education hereby approves the April 23, 2026 recommendation of the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts Board of Trustees to appoint **Dr. Diana Rogers-Adkinson** as President of the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts. Such appointment shall be effective on or about July 1, 2026, and is approved subject to and in accordance with the attached Terms and Conditions of Appointment, and subject to the successful and satisfactory completion of a State Police background check.

Authority Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 15A, Sections 9(q) and 21

Contact Constantia T. Papanikolaou, Chief Legal Counsel

Chair Gabrieli next introduced *BHE 26-58: Springfield Technical Community College Presidential*

Appointment. Commissioner Ortega offered brief remarks, stating that he and Member Bill Walczak had met with all final candidates, and noting that Dr. Cournoyer was well-poised to take on the challenges of leading the institution forward. He then invited STCC Board of Trustees Chair Michael R. Knapik to summarize the search process.

Chair Knapik thanked the Board for the opportunity to present STCC's recommended candidate. He stated that the trustees had begun the process after President Cook announced his departure and that the presidential search committee - which represented the campus community, stakeholders, alumni, board members, unions, students, and others - followed a roadmap provided by the Board. He stated that Commissioner Ortega and Member Walczak also met with the finalists and that the STCC Board of Trustees met in May and selected Dr. Cournoyer as the next president.

Chair Knapik reported that stakeholder engagement began in December and informed the presidential position profile, which was in place by mid-January. He stated that the search generated approximately 61 applications, which were narrowed to 34 for search committee review. He said the search committee represented the campus community, stakeholders, alumni, board members, unions, students, and others, and that the pool was representative across ethnic groups. Chair Knapik reported that nine candidates participated in virtual interviews, that four finalists were selected, that one finalist withdrew, and that three finalists came to campus in April for interviews, stakeholder engagement, and question-and-answer sessions. He stated that Commissioner Ortega and Member Walczak also met with the finalists and that the STCC Board of Trustees met in May and selected Dr. Cournoyer as the next president.

Chair Knapik described STCC's role as a gateway pathway for opportunity and economic mobility, noting Springfield's median family income and the percentage of STCC students from Springfield. He stated that STCC is Baystate Health's largest workforce partner and that he looks forward to strengthening that partnership under Dr. Cournoyer's leadership. Chair Knapik stated that Dr. Cournoyer's background in academic affairs was important to the trustees and that the College has built relevance to workforce, student interests, health sciences, STEM, quantum pursuits, cybersecurity, and other areas. He also noted that Dr. Cournoyer is a rising Aspen presidential fellow and began her career as a librarian, which he associated with listening, understanding, probing, and being helpful.

Dr. Cournoyer thanked Chair Gabrieli, Commissioner Ortega, the Board, and President Grant for MassArt's hospitality. She stated that she was enthusiastic to be at STCC and has felt passionate for many years about the opportunities that community colleges provide to students. She stated that when students graduate with a credential of value and obtain a family-sustaining wage, their lives and families change, and that is what changes communities. Dr. Cournoyer stated that she felt that passion when she stepped onto the STCC campus and that she was excited to listen, learn, and continue the College's work.

Chair Gabrieli asked Dr. Cournoyer about her experience implementing Guided Pathways. Dr.

Cournoyer said she was never a "15 to finish" advocate because each student is individual and family life affects what a student can take on, but she acknowledged that research from Guided Pathways shows the value of getting students on a program, providing a clear sequence of courses, offering holistic supports, and providing advising to help students graduate at higher rates. She also emphasized that community college students may need to onboard and offboard and that the institution should keep the dialogue open so students understand the College is there when they are ready to return.

Chair Gabrieli also asked about Dr. Cournoyer's work increasing Early College participation. Dr. Cournoyer stated that her institution had built strong relationships with local high schools. She said that, while early college growth had been successful, she would like to see Early College students placed on clearly charted pathways rather than taking random early college courses. She stated that students benefit from understanding how high school coursework connects to community college and then to bachelor's or master's degree pathways.

Hearing no further discussion, Chair Gabrieli called for a vote. On a motion duly made and seconded, *BHE 26-58* 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
- Michael Hannigan – Yes
- Bob LePage, Secretary of Education Designee – Yes
- Bill Walczak – Yes

BHE 26-58 SPRINGFIELD TECHNICAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRESIDENTIAL APPOINTMENT

VOTED The Board of Higher Education hereby approves the May 4, 2026, recommendation of the Springfield Technical Community College Board of Trustees to appoint **Dr. Jennifer G. Cournoyer** as President of Springfield Technical Community College. Such appointment is effective on or about July 13, 2026, and is approved subject to and in accordance with the attached Terms of Appointment, and subject to the successful and satisfactory completion of a State Police background check.

Authority Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 15A, Sections 9(q) and 21

Contact Constantia T. Papanikolaou, Chief Legal Counsel

V. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Chair Gabrieli opened the public participation portion of the meeting and stated that the Board had received three requests for public comment.

MassArt Professor of Humanities Jenni-Rebecca Falcetta: Professor Falcetta offered comment on the topic of reduced credit bachelor's degree programs, and cautioned that such programs may deprive students of the vital time needed to adjust to college life, complete well-rounded coursework, and prepare for their futures. Instead, she advocated for lowering the financial costs of a traditional four-year education to maintain its quality rather than cutting its duration.

MassArt Humanities Professor Maura Smyth: Professon Smyth urged the Board to reconsider the adoption of 90-credit bachelor's degrees, arguing that truncating programs could compromise student learning, fail to meet employers' skill demands, and turn early graduates into educational experiments. Instead, she advocated for addressing higher education costs by reducing administrative bloat and increasing public funding to support a robust, traditional 120-credit degree.

Massachusetts Teachers Association President Max Page: Mr. Page offered comment on the topic of reduced credit bachelor's degree programs. He said that the purpose of public education is to cultivate well-rounded citizens and lifelong learners, rather than just corporate workers, by keeping higher education rich and accessible. Citing to John Adams's, he urged the Board to reject rushed proposals that undermine four-year universities and instead champion true affordability through debt-free public higher education.

VI. ACCEPTANCE OF MINUTES

Chair Gabrieli requested a motion to bundle and approve the minutes from the following BHE Meetings: February 10, 2026, and April 7, 2026. On a motion duly made and seconded, both sets 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

- Alex Cortez – Yes
- Michael Hannigan – Yes
- Bob LePage, Secretary of Education Designee – Yes
- Bill Walczak – Yes

VII. REMARKS

A. Board of Higher Education Chair

Chair Gabrieli stated that he was glad the Board was meeting in person and thanked President Grant, her staff, and all those who helped organize the meeting. He acknowledged that the Board's primarily virtual format has allowed for more frequent meetings and broader participation, while also recognizing the value of meeting in person periodically.

Chair Gabrieli reflected on the innovation agenda and cooperative education, describing the Commonwealth's work to expand cooperative education partnerships with colleges as nationally distinctive. He stated that paid internships and co-op experiences provide meaningful benefits for students and employers, and that the strong interest from Massachusetts colleges in modest grants and technical assistance reflects the type of system-level innovation the Board seeks to support.

Chair Gabrieli also responded to the public comments on sub-120-credit degrees. He stated that people can sincerely disagree about what belongs in a college degree and noted that the Board may soon have the opportunity to consider an actual application for a sub-120-credit program. He stated that the Board would not be voting to change Massachusetts public higher education or state law, but rather to consider whether a proposed pilot meets the applicable process and expectations, including informed consent, data collection, and work with the accreditor. He acknowledged the concerns raised during public comments and stated that these are decisions the Board faces together.

B. Secretary of Education

Assistant Secretary LePage yielded his remarks.

C. Presidents

[State University Segmental Report](#)

MassArt President Mary Grant delivered remarks on behalf of the State Universities in the absence of Westfield State University President Linda Thompson, the current chair of the Council

of State University Presidents. She briefly highlighted commencement season, State University graduates, honorary degree recipients, campus celebrations, the upcoming Council of Presidents retreat, the presidential transition at MCLA, and partnership between stakeholders within state government on the budget, student success, and the BRIGHT Act.

[Community College Segmental Report](#)

North Shore Community College President William Heineman delivered remarks on behalf of the Community Colleges. He welcomed President Grant as the incoming Chair of the Council of State University Presidents, thanked President Linda Thompson for her service, and stated that he would remain Chair of the Council of Presidents for the Community Colleges for another year. He highlighted commencement season, including North Shore Community College's graduating class and the first graduating class from the Frederick Douglass Collegiate Academy, and noted several leadership transitions within the Community College segment. President Heineman also referenced the fiscal year budget process, continued advocacy for SUCCESS funding, Workforce Pell implementation, federal grant challenges, and the Department's partnership on the legislatively mandated compensation study for Community College faculty and professional staff.

D. Student Advisory Council

Student Member Michael Hannigan provided his final report on behalf of the Student Advisory Council (SAC). He reported that SAC had elected Nate Woodard of Greenfield Community College as the Community College segment representative and Michael Borowski as the UMass system's segmental representative. Student Member Hannigan stated that the State University segment position had not yet been filled, that applications remained open, and that elections would hopefully occur in September.

Student Member Hannigan reflected on his service as a first-generation, low-income student and former custodian at UMass Amherst, stating that it had been an honor to serve students across the Commonwealth. He stated that he had seen firsthand how investments in financial aid are changing higher education and students' lives, and he urged the Board to consider the recommendations made by the Commission on Higher Education Quality and Affordability (CHEQA) and advocate for the funding and staffing needed to implement them. He concluded by noting that he would transition to a four-year institution and expressed gratitude that his journey began at a Massachusetts Community College.

Chair Gabrieli thanked Student Member Hannigan, and Student Advisor Rosenkrantz for their service, noting that both student representatives illustrated the importance of having student voices at the Board table.

C. Commissioner

Commissioner Ortega stated that the Department was pleased to see continued legislative support for investments in financial aid and student support. He also expressed continued enthusiasm for the BRIGHT Act, which he described as a \$2.5 billion bond bill to invest in building capacity and infrastructure at institutions of higher education. Commissioner Ortega stated that the Act aligns with the Board's mission of supporting not only affordability, but also student success and high-quality educational opportunities, and said the Department would remain actively engaged in providing technical support as the bill continued to move forward.

Commissioner Ortega also addressed recent institutional closures and transitions. He stated that institutions are managing challenging conditions, including demographic shifts, changing enrollment patterns, fluctuating economic environments, and a shifting federal landscape. Commissioner Ortega assured the Board that, consistent with the Department's regulatory responsibilities, the Department has been working closely with leadership at Hampshire College and Anna Maria College to help ensure orderly transitions, minimize disruption, and maximize opportunities available to students. He noted that teach-out plans generally provide students with multiple transfer opportunities, including at least one public institution option, and thanked public institutions that have stepped up to assist students and Department staff through the process, including Worcester State University, MassArt and MCLA. He urged students from Hampshire College and Anna Maria College who have not secured transfer pathways to contact transfer counselors at their institutions.

Commissioner Ortega then invited Deputy Commissioner for Policy Michael Dannenberg and Chief Legal Counsel Constantia Papanikolaou to provide federal updates. Deputy Commissioner Dannenberg discussed new federal loan limits affecting graduate students, parents, and undergraduates, and stated that Commissioner Ortega had submitted a public comment letter on behalf of the Healey-Driscoll Administration on proposed regulations, strongly urging that programs in nursing, education, and social work should be included within the higher loan limits for professional programs.

Deputy Commissioner Dannenberg also discussed how the newly proposed federal accreditation regulations would significantly change accreditor recognition, transfer-credit acceptance, institutional policies, and minimum student outcomes. He noted that final regulations are expected to be released for public comment on November 1, 2026 with implementation in July 2027 if finalized on that timeline.

Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou stated that members of her legal team continue to work closely with the Attorney General's Office and campus general counsels to monitor rapidly developing federal matters that could affect institutions. She reported that Attorney General Andrea Campbell announced today that she had joined a coalition of Attorneys General filing a

lawsuit against the U.S. Department of Education regarding the student loan rule discussed by Deputy Commissioner Dannenberg.

Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou also updated the Board on pending multi-state litigation related to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) and the Admissions Consumer Transparency Supplement (ACTS) survey. She stated that the federal government had rolled out a survey requesting student data that would provide disaggregated information on testing and GPAs for several years of admitted classes. She stated that the concern is the intended use of the data, including the belief that the federal administration intends to use it to support claims of intentional discrimination based on racial disparities and to pressure institutions to stop considering factors beyond test scores and GPA in admissions. She reported that, on April 3, 2026 a U.S. District Court judge granted a preliminary injunction staying the U.S. Department of Education's requirements that institutions submit the survey and prohibiting the Administration from using any survey submitted before the injunction. She noted that the Department filed a declaration in support of the litigation and is actively monitoring compliance with the injunction.

Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou also provided an update regarding the duration-of-status issue for student visas. She stated that the Department of Homeland Security had submitted a final rule to eliminate duration of status for certain student visas (e.g., F-1, J-1). She explained that the rule would tie an individual's "duration of status" to a fixed period, generally four years, before an individual must formally apply to extend a visa. She expressed concern that the rule creates uncertainty for international students, particularly graduate, Ph.D., and other advanced-degree students, whose programs traditionally run longer than 4 years or take more than 4 years to complete and as such the rule would be burdensome and disruptive. The Department is monitoring the situation with AGO colleagues.

VIII. BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION MOTIONS – Part B

List of documents used:

[BHE 26-59](#); [BHE 25-60](#); [BHE 26-61](#); [BHE 26-62](#); [BHE 26-63](#); [BHE 26-64](#); [BHE 26-65](#); [BHE 26-66](#); [BHE 26-66A Attachment](#)

Chair Gabrieli introduced the motions: *BHE 26-59, Renewal of Membership in the Commonwealth Honors Program for Berkshire Community College*; *BHE 26-60, Renewal of Membership in the Commonwealth Honors Program for University of Massachusetts Amherst*; and *BHE 26-61, Renewal of Membership in the Commonwealth Honors Program for Worcester State University*.

Chair Gabrieli stated that the Board would briefly review the motions independently, as they

each recommended renewal of individual Community College campus's respective memberships in the Commonwealth Honors Program for seven years (effective July 1), but he asked for a motion to bundle them for voting purposes. On a motion duly made and seconded, the motions were bundled for a single vote.

Chair Gabrieli recognized Keith M. Connors, Program Director for Academic Affairs and Student Success, to answer questions. Chair Gabrieli noted that the Honors Program guidelines had been revised several years earlier, and Mr. Connors confirmed that the guidelines had been revised five years prior to address equity issues under consideration at that time by the Department. Chair Gabrieli stated that the materials provided updates, including peer-school visit information, comments, and institutional responses. He said he appreciated the thoroughness of the information and that the process reflected real review rather than a *pro forma* review.

Vice Chair Chernow thanked Mr. Connors for the reviews and asked how students are selected for Honors Programs. Mr. Connors stated that admissions processes are specific to each institution and invited program leaders present at the meeting to discuss each program's respective application and admissions related data. Mari Castaneda, Dean of Commonwealth Honors College at UMass Amherst, stated that first-year UMass Amherst students are admitted through the central admissions process and invited to accept an invitation to the Commonwealth Honors College when they are accepted to UMass Amherst. She stated that the College also has an on-campus application process for sophomores and juniors who were not admitted as first-year students and that students need a minimum 3.4 GPA. She reported increased interest, with on-campus applications rising from approximately 200 to approximately 450 per year, approximately 650 to 700 first-year students accepted annually, and an additional 150 transfer students.

Nicole Rosa, Professor of Psychology and Director of Commonwealth Honors at Worcester State University, stated that Worcester State's process is similar. She said roughly 10 percent of incoming students are offered admission to the Honors Program when admitted to Worcester State and may opt into the program. She also stated that the program has grown from about 80 incoming first-year students two years ago to a little over 100 expected incoming first-year students this year and that current students may transfer into the Honors Program through a process similar to UMass Amherst's.

Chris Laney, Professor of History and Honors Coordinator at Berkshire Community College, stated that Berkshire Community College uses the statewide 3.2 minimum GPA and also considers faculty recommendations and other measures, including SAT scores for students entering from high school.

Hearing no further discussion, Chair Gabrieli called for a vote. On a motion duly made and seconded, *BHE 26-59*, *BHE 26-60*, and *BHE 26-61* were 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
- Alex Cortez – Yes
- Michael Hannigan – Yes
- Bob LePage, Secretary of Education Designee – Yes
- Bill Walczak – Yes

BHE 26-59 RENEWAL OF MEMBERSHIP IN THE COMMONWEALTH HONORS PROGRAM FOR BERKSHIRE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

VOTED The Board of Higher Education accepts the report and recommendation of the Commonwealth Honors Council Executive Committee and renews the membership of **Berkshire Community College** in the **Commonwealth Honors Program** for seven years, effective July 1, 2026.

Authority Commonwealth Honors Program Approval Process Guidelines as Revised by the Board of Higher Education in March 2022; G.L. c. 15A, § 9.

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

Keith M. Connors, Program Director for Academic Affairs and Student Success

BHE 26-60 RENEWAL OF MEMBERSHIP IN THE COMMONWEALTH HONORS PROGRAM FOR UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

VOTED The Board of Higher Education accepts the report and recommendation of the Commonwealth Honors Council Executive Committee and renews the membership of **University of Massachusetts Amherst** in the **Commonwealth Honors Program** for seven years, effective July 1, 2026.

Authority Commonwealth Honors Program Approval Process Guidelines as Revised by the Board of Higher Education in March 2022; G.L. c. 15A, § 9.

Contact Richard Riccardi, Deputy Commissioner for Academic Affairs and

Student Success

Keith M. Connors, Program Director for Academic Affairs and Student Success

BHE 26-61 RENEWAL OF MEMBERSHIP IN THE COMMONWEALTH HONORS PROGRAM FOR WORCESTER STATE UNIVERSITY

VOTED The Board of Higher Education accepts the report and recommendation of the Commonwealth Honors Council Executive Committee and renews the membership of **Worcester State University** in the **Commonwealth Honors Program** for seven years, effective July 1, 2026.

Authority Commonwealth Honors Program Approval Process Guidelines as Revised by the Board of Higher Education in March 2022; G.L. c. 15A, § 9.

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

Keith M. Connors, Program Director for Academic Affairs and Student Success

Chair Gabrieli next introduced the motion, *BHE 26-62, Approval of Letter of Intent of Bridgewater State University to Award the Bachelor of Science in Data Science for Fast Track Review*. He noted that representatives from Bridgewater State University were available and asked whether there were any questions from the Board.

Chair Gabrieli asked about the proposal's emphasis on creating a more accessible pathway with reduced mathematical and computational barriers, specifically how the program balanced broader access with ensuring that graduates would remain competitive as they entered the workforce.

Wanchunzi Yu, Assistant Professor of Mathematics at Bridgewater State University, responded that the proposed curriculum includes four pathways or concentrations: mathematical, statistical, computing, and general data science. She stated that students interested in learning more mathematics or the foundations of data science can choose the mathematics pathway, while students who want to learn how to use and apply data can choose the general or statistics pathway. She explained that Bridgewater State University serves a large proportion of underrepresented students in southeastern Massachusetts and that the reduced mathematics requirements are intended to attract students who may not view themselves as STEM students or may not believe they are strong in mathematics, while still providing a pathway into the data science job market. She stated that the program integrates AI and that students who are

stronger in mathematics may choose pathways that include the mathematical foundations of AI and AI for data analytics.

Assistant Secretary LePage stated that he and Commissioner Ortega had recently visited Bristol Community College and discussed its new AI degree. He noted the regional collaboration with Bridgewater State University, beginning with cyber and extending into data sciences, as part of a regional workforce development strategy.

Hearing no further discussion, Chair Gabrieli called for a vote. On a motion duly made and seconded, *BHE 26-62* 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
- Alex Cortez – Yes
- Michael Hannigan – Yes
- Bob LePage, Secretary of Education Designee – Yes
- Bill Walczak – Yes

**BHE 26-62 APPROVAL OF LETTER OF INTENT OF BRIDGEWATER STATE
UNIVERSITY TO AWARD THE BACHELOR OF SCIENCE IN DATA
SCIENCE**

VOTED The Board of Higher Education (BHE) has evaluated the Letter of Intent of **Bridgewater State University** to award the **Bachelor of Science in Data Science** 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 FastTrack 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 next introduced *BHE 26-63, Approval of Letter of Intent of Bunker Hill Community College to Award the Associate of Arts in Environmental Studies* and asked whether there were

any questions from the Board.

Hearing no further discussion, Chair Gabrieli called for a vote. On a motion duly made and seconded, *BHE 26-63* 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
- Michael Hannigan – Yes
- Bob LePage, Secretary of Education Designee – Yes
- Bill Walczak – Yes

BHE 26-63 APPROVAL OF LETTER OF INTENT OF BUNKER HILL COMMUNITY COLLEGE TO AWARD THE ASSOCIATE OF ARTS IN ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES

VOTED The Board of Higher Education (BHE) has evaluated the Letter of Intent of **Bunker Hill Community College** to award the **Associate of Arts in Environmental Studies** 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 *BHE 26-64, Approval of Letter of Intent of Bunker Hill Community College to Award the Associate of Science in Digital Filmmaking for Fast Track Review*.

Chair Gabrieli stated that he had reviewed the listed transfer possibilities and was surprised that the schools listed were fairly far from Boston. He asked whether there were possible transfer options in the Boston area, including MassArt or other institutions. R. Arlene Vallie, Associate Provost at Bunker Hill Community College, responded that conversations were in progress with

the Visual and Media Arts program regarding joint admissions opportunities and transferability. She stated that the Digital Filmmaking program and the Visual and Media Arts Department are part of a larger conversation and that Bunker Hill intends to include local institutions among its transfer options.

Chair Gabrieli encouraged continued conversation on this issue. He stated that the Board had heard meaningful testimony about the importance of protecting and preserving four-year degree programs, but that in this situation the proposal did not clearly identify a pathway from a two-year program to a four-year degree. He acknowledged that faculty from the institutions involved must agree and that there are complicated issues, but stated that people will expect campuses to act like one coordinated higher education system. He encouraged campuses to keep that in mind.

MassArt President Mary Grant stated that MassArt was discussing joint admissions opportunities that would allow students to be admitted to MassArt and a partner community college at the same time. She stated that MassArt was working on this with Bunker Hill Community College and Roxbury Community College and that more information would be forthcoming.

Hearing no further discussion, Chair Gabrieli called for a vote. On a motion duly made and seconded, *BHE 26-64* was approved 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
- Michael Hannigan – Yes
- Bob LePage, Secretary of Education Designee – Yes
- Bill Walczak – Yes

BHE 26-64 APPROVAL OF LETTER OF INTENT OF BUNKER HILL COMMUNITY COLLEGE TO AWARD THE ASSOCIATE OF SCIENCE IN DIGITAL FILMMAKING

VOTED The Board of Higher Education (BHE) has evaluated the Letter of Intent of **Bunker Hill Community College** to award the **Associate of Science in Digital Filmmaking** 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 FastTrack 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 next introduced *BHE 26-65, Approval of Massachusetts State College Building Authority Residence Hall Technology Upgrades, Westfield State University*. Chair Gabrieli asked whether there was any discussion. Hearing none, Chair Gabrieli called for a vote.

On a motion duly made and seconded, *BHE 26-65* was approved 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
- Michael Hannigan – Yes
- Bob LePage, Secretary of Education Designee – Yes
- Bill Walczak – Yes

BHE 26-65 MSCBA RESIDENCE HALL TECHNOLOGY UPGRADES, WESTFIELD STATE

VOTED The Board of Higher Education approves the Massachusetts State College Building Authority residence hall technology upgrades at Westfield State University, as follows:

1. The Commissioner of the Department Higher Education (the "Commissioner") is authorized and directed in the name and on behalf of the Board of Higher Education (the "Board") to make a written request to the Massachusetts State College Building Authority (the "Authority") that the Authority initiate the project for Westfield State

University (the "University") described on Exhibit A attached hereto.

2. The Bonds issued by the Authority to finance the projects for which a request is hereby authorized may be issued together with or separately from bonds issued to carry out other projects of the Authority for which the Board authorizes a request.

3. The Commissioner and all other officers of the Board, each acting singly, are authorized to request the Secretary of Administration and Finance to approve in writing the initiation by the Authority of the projects for which a request is hereby authorized, and to do such other things and take such other action as the officer so acting shall, as conclusively evidenced by the taking of such action, deem necessary or desirable to be done or taken to carry into effect the matters hereby authorized.

4. The Board and The Commonwealth of Massachusetts, acting by and through the Board, declare their official intent as referred to in Section 1.150-2 of the Treasury Regulations promulgated under the Internal Revenue Code of 1986, as amended (the "Code"), that the Commonwealth shall be reimbursed from the proceeds of tax-exempt bonds reasonably expected to be issued by the Authority expenditures temporarily advanced by the Commonwealth (including in such term the Board and the State Universities) on or after the date which is 60 days prior to the effective date of this declaration of official intent (except for certain "preliminary expenditures" as defined in Section 1.150-2 of the Code or other amounts which are not subject to such time limitation) for projects for which a written request is hereby authorized, the maximum principal amount of such bonds expected to be issued being \$2,500,000 for expenditures for the Project (described in Exhibit A attached hereto).

Authority Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 15A, Sections 4, 6, and 9; Chapter 703 of the Acts of 1963, sections 1-3, et seq., as amended

Contact Matthew Cole, Deputy Commissioner for Administration, Finance, and Operations

Chair Gabrieli next introduced BHE 26-66, *Approval of Renaming of Berkshire Community College's Library in Honor of Ruth Edmonds Hill*. He noted that Berkshire Community College President Ellen Kennedy was present in person and available to answer questions. Hearing no further discussion, Chair Gabrieli called for a vote.

On a motion duly made and seconded, *BHE 26-65* was approved 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
- Michael Hannigan – Yes
- Bob LePage, Secretary of Education Designee – Yes
- Bill Walczak – Yes

**BHE 26-66 APPROVAL OF RENAMING OF BERKSHIRE COMMUNITY
COLLEGE’S LIBRARY**

VOTED The Board of Higher Education hereby approves the request of Berkshire Community College’s Board of Trustees to rescind the name of the Reverend Jonathan Edwards from the College’s Library and name the Library in honor of Ruth Edmonds Hill.

Authority Massachusetts General Laws c. 15A, §6 and 9(m); BHE 17-23.

Contact Matthew Cole, Deputy Commissioner Administration, Finance, and Operations

IX. OTHER BUSINESS

Member Battaglini raised concerns about the timeline for sub-120 innovation pilot proposals expected to be presented at the June Board meeting. She stated that the June meeting was only 28 days away. expressed concern that the 28-day timeline before the June 2026 meeting leaves insufficient time for public comment review and thorough Board evaluation of the sub-120 innovation pilot proposals.

Commissioner Ortega asked whether Member Battaglini was requesting additional time for Board review and stated that the Department had hoped to provide the Board with at least one week for review before the meeting, rather than the typical three days. Member Battaglini confirmed that the timeline provided 21 days for public comment followed by one week for

review and asked whether the Board would have all of the information needed to make an informed decision. Commissioner Ortega confirmed that they would.

Member Cortez asked how many proposals had been received. Commissioner Ortega stated that the Department had received two proposals- one from Merrimack College and one from Suffolk University. Member Cortez stated that the number of proposals and the capacity required to review them were important factors, adding that two proposals did not appear to present a significant volume for review.

Chair Gabrieli reiterated that both proposals had already been reviewed through the accreditation process and had also been reviewed by Department staff. Vice Chair Chernow stated that she did not question staff's ability to review and compile materials, but asked whether, because this was a new process, the Board should receive proposals at one meeting and vote at a later meeting rather than receive, review, and vote at the same meeting, considering that one of the regulatory framework's goals was to allow deeper analysis of proposals before submission.

Chair Gabrieli stated that the Board could decide not to vote if it wished, although doing so would likely affect the colleges' ability to move forward on their current timeline. Vice Chair Chernow stated that the issue should not be framed as "now or never" and that future proposals could come earlier with more time. Chair Gabrieli stated that the Board should have an opportunity for deliberation and that members may identify questions once they have seen the proposals.

Student Advisor Rosenkrantz stated that she had heard concerns from professors about the quality of education students would receive if they studied for one year less than the typical student. She asked whether, if a student enrolled in a three-year bachelor's program and later decided that it had not provided enough schooling, there would be a pathway to return and complete a final year for a four-year degree. Assistant Secretary LePage stated that such students would be receiving an applied bachelor's degree. Chair Gabrieli stated that there is also a requirement that the sponsoring college provide a pathway for the student to complete a fourth year at the standard tuition level.

Member Cortez stated that he appreciated the discussion of structures the Board might encourage or require. He stated that he hoped that the June BHE meeting would include significant time for deliberation and discussion and that the Board could decide whether it was comfortable taking a vote or needed more information. He stated that the meeting should not include only a brief discussion before a vote, but rather should devote substantial time to the issue, potentially to the exclusion of more conventional agenda items, given the level of discussion and scrutiny expected.

Chair Gabrieli stated that the Board would provide time for discussion and that he was sensitive to the concerns raised. He noted that the Board had already approved a regulation allowing institutions to apply, and that the upcoming votes would concern whether to accept staff recommendations on whether specific applications comply with that regulation. Chair Gabrieli

stated that the Board would preserve the time needed for discussion and that whether the Board proceeds would depend on the will of the Board following deliberation.

Commissioner Ortega suggested that, as the Department prepares for the June meeting, it could recirculate the regulatory criteria to the Board. He said significant effort had gone into articulating approximately 20 criteria that applications must satisfy, based on feedback from the Board and the public, in addition to eight to 10 additional criteria included by NECHE.

Chair Gabrieli stated that the central question for discussion should be the degree to which recommended applications match the regulations approved by the Board, and that it was the role of Department staff to assist the Board with determining whether applicant-institutions have complied with regulatory requirements set forth in 610 CMR 16.00. Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou suggested that Department staff could prepare and facilitate a crosswalk comparing and aligning the content of each proposal to the regulatory requirements. Chair Gabrieli agreed that seeing such information within the timeline would be helpful for Board members.

There being no further other business, Chair Gabrieli requested a motion to adjourn.

X. ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 1:11 p.m.

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