

MASSACHUSETTS BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

June 26, 2026

10:00 a.m.

Via Zoom

Meeting Minutes

A special meeting of the Board of Higher Education (BHE or Board) was held on Friday, June 26, 2026, remotely via teleconference (Zoom).

The following Board Members were present:

Chris Gabrieli, Chair

Danielle Allen

Lisa Battaglino

Mary Burns

Harneen Chernow, Vice Chair

Veronica Conforme¹

Alex Cortez²

Michael Hannigan, Voting Student Member, Community College Segment

Bob LePage, Secretary of Education Designee³

Francesca Purcell

Marjorie Ringrose

Shannon Rudder

Bill Walczak

Stephen Zrike, Secretary of Education⁴

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 special meeting of the Board to order at 10:02 a.m. Roll call attendance was taken (see above for attendance roster).

¹ Arrived at 10:19 am after roll call attendance was taken and departed at 12:07pm.

² Departed at 12:07 pm.

³ Attended with Secretary Zrike and served as the Secretary's designee following the Secretary's departure for another meeting.

⁴ Arrived at 10:03 am after roll call attendance was taken and departed at 11:50 am.

Chair Gabrieli welcomed and introduced three new Board members: Francesca Purcell, Marjorie Ringrose, and Shannon Rudder. He explained that the new appointments filled two vacant seats resulting from prior resignations and one seat previously held by Ann Christensen, whose initial term had expired.

Chair Gabrieli then explained that the Board had scheduled special meetings to address business items that do not require the full agenda used for regularly scheduled meetings. He stated that the Board had two matters of business: two applications from private higher education institutions submitted pursuant to the Board's innovation regulations; and the standard summer delegation of authority to the Commissioner. Chair Gabrieli then opened the public comment portion of the meeting.

II. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Chair Gabrieli stated that the Board had received 11 requests for public comment and reminded speakers to keep their remarks to two minutes. Public comments are summarized below:

Max Page, President of the Massachusetts Teachers Association (MTA): Mr. Page expressed concern that the Board was considering reduced-credit bachelor's degree proposals on an expedited timeline and characterized the proposals as offering working-class students a three-quarters bachelor's degree. He stated that the Board had received approximately 400 comments, with only five in support; that faculty had submitted 100 pieces of testimony; that MTA members had gathered 1,000 signatures; and that 16 legislators had written to express concerns and ask the Board to slow down. He urged the Board to pause, review the public comments, engage in dialogue with faculty and staff at public colleges and universities, and not move forward with approving what he characterized as "less than degrees."

Matt Bach, incoming President of the Massachusetts Teachers Association (MTA): Mr. Bach expressed concern that reduced-credit degrees would create a two-tiered system in which students with financial means would continue to pursue traditional degrees, while financially disadvantaged students would be directed toward credentials he believed would be viewed as lower quality. He urged the Board to reject the reduced-credit degree proposals and instead pursue greater investment in public colleges and debt-free higher education.

Claudine Barnes, President of the Massachusetts Community College Association and Professor of History and Political Science at Cape Cod Community College: Ms. Barnes stated that there had not been serious discussion about the impact on community colleges, MassTransfer, or MassEducate, and she expressed concern that reductions in history, political science, ethics, social sciences, and humanities would limit higher education's ability to produce well-rounded students and knowledgeable citizens. She urged the Board to reconsider using this approach to innovation.

Heike Schotten, Professor of Political Science at the University of Massachusetts Boston: Professor

Schotten stated that, while cutting one-fourth of undergraduate coursework may reduce cost, such degrees would be more expensive in the long run because students would receive less general education and fewer upper-level electives. She argued that the degrees could close doors professionally, limit graduate school access, manufacture dependency on the institution offering the degree, and create a two-tier system for low-income, working-class, and first-generation students. She asked Board members to consider whether they would want their own children enrolled in such programs and, if not, why they would accept that standard for other families.

Irina Seceleanu, Professor of Mathematics at Bridgewater State University: Professor Seceleanu asked the Board to consider whether the two reduced-credit bachelor's degree proposals met the evidence standard required by the Board's regulation. She stated that neither proposal provided peer-reviewed research, longitudinal data, completed studies, or sufficient evidence of educational effectiveness to support the claim that students would not be harmed or that the degrees would be equivalent to traditional degrees. She argued that employer acceptance was conditioned on graduates having the same skills as four-year graduates, and that the proposals had not established that equivalency.

Jacquie Kurland, Associate Professor of Speech, Language, and Hearing Sciences at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and Co-President of the Massachusetts Society of Professors: Professor Kurland expressed concern about what she described as the hasty nature of the sub-120-credit proposals. She stated that the Merrimack and Suffolk proposals did not adhere to NECHE guidelines for reduced-credit degrees, citing concerns regarding disclosure language, course lists, pathway plans for transfer to a traditional degree, remediation plans, outcome metrics, and degree nomenclature. Professor Kurland stated that the proposals failed to address disclosure and informed consent requirements intended to protect students from harm.

Gayle Carvalho, President of the Quincy Education Association: Ms. Carvalho stated that first generation and socio-economically disadvantaged students may be disproportionately impacted by the potential limitations of reduced-credit degrees and also expressed concern about the effect on the community college model, including affordability, flexibility, and transfer pathways, and urged the Board to stand for the integrity of the bachelor's degree and community colleges.

Aruna Krishnamurthy, Professor of English at Fitchburg State University: Professor Krishnamurthy stated that while the proposals claim to advance employability and workplace readiness, intangible skills such as communication, teamwork, and leadership are acquired through general education courses. employability arguments and employer interest in skills such as communication, teamwork, critical thinking, leadership, and work ethic. She asked where and how students acquire those skills and stated that general education courses across disciplines are where students develop critical thinking, problem-solving, methodology, and perspective. Professor Krishnamurthy stated that Merrimack's revised general education approach and Suffolk's limited general education courses would hollow out the core and would not produce the skills employers seek.

Ella Prabhakar, University of Massachusetts Amherst alumna: A recent graduate, Ms. Prabhakar acknowledged the affordability challenges facing higher education and students. She stated that her electives had been among the most rewarding parts of her undergraduate experience and helped her connect ideas across disciplines. She argued that reducing degrees by a year would reduce coursework, internship opportunities, campus involvement, and time to build connections, and she urged investment in schools, internal reforms, and financial aid rather than reducing educational quality.

Brad Freeman, Vice President of Government Relations for the Association of Independent Colleges and Universities in Massachusetts (AICUM): Mr. Freeman offered support for the Merrimack College and Suffolk University pilot proposals, noting the Department's and Board's work to create a process that encourages colleges and universities to better serve students by developing innovative programs on a pilot basis. Mr. Freeman stated that the proposals align with the goals of the Board's innovation regulations by addressing affordability and workforce shortages, expanding access in high-demand professions, and providing workforce-aligned pathways for students who wish to earn a bachelor's degree in less than four years.

Joanna Gonsalves, President of the Massachusetts State College Association and faculty member in the Psychology Department at Salem State University: Focusing on Merrimack's proposed reduced-credit Psychology degree, Ms. Gonsalves stated that the proposal diminishes general education and questioned the added educational value of a 90- or 96-credit bachelor's degree when many careers cited in the proposal are already available to students with associate degrees. Ms. Gonsalves stated that the final years of a traditional bachelor's degree provide advanced disciplinary knowledge, research and analytical skills, professional writing, and preparation for graduate school. She stated that the proposal had not demonstrated the added value of the proposed credential.

In addition to the oral public comments summarized above, the Board received written comments from the Massachusetts State Universities Council of Presidents regarding the Merrimack College and Suffolk University applications for sub-120-credit applied baccalaureate degree pilot programs. The Council expressed concern that reduced-credit bachelor's degree programs could create separate educational pathways, potentially limit access to high-impact educational experiences for low-income and first-generation students, and raise questions regarding academic value, employer and graduate school recognition, market demand, student understanding of the credential, and the need for additional evidence before approval.

After the final oral public comment, Chair Gabrieli thanked the public commenters for keeping to the allotted time and making their points clear. Chair Gabrieli then proceeded to the Board of Higher Education Motions section of the agenda.

III. BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION MOTIONS

List of documents used: [BHE 26-67](#); [BHE-26-68](#); [BHE-26-69](#)

Chair Gabrieli next introduced BHE 26-67, a motion to approve Merrimack College's application, submitted pursuant to 610 CMR 16.00, to offer the following four 96-credit applied baccalaureate degree pilot programs: Applied Bachelor of Arts in Psychology, Applied Bachelor of Arts in Communication, Applied Bachelor of Arts in Criminal Justice, and Applied Bachelor of Science in Business Administration.

Chair Gabrieli also introduced BHE 26-68, a motion to approve Suffolk University's application, submitted pursuant to 610 CMR 16.00, to offer one 94-credit applied baccalaureate degree pilot program: Applied Bachelor of Science in Healthcare Administration and Innovation.

Chair Gabrieli then stated that BHE 26-67 and BHE 26-68 would be discussed together before being voted on separately.

Chair Gabrieli provided context for the discussion, noting that the Board had begun publicly considering the subject of reduced-credit degree programs and other innovative proposals in December 2024 through discussions with outside experts, segmental representatives, public commenters, and others. He stated that the Board had also considered its regulatory obligations and how those obligations would interact with the role of accreditors, and that the Board had worked to align its process with the process of the regional accreditor, the New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE) where possible. Chair Gabrieli noted that the Board had voted to put the proposed regulation out for public comment, had received comments, and had finalized and approved the regulation earlier in the spring. He emphasized that the items before the Board were two institutional program applications that were submitted to the Board pursuant to Board regulation 610 CMR 16.00 and approved by NECHE, the institutions' accreditor, while acknowledging that many public commenters had addressed the broader question of whether reduced-credit degrees should be offered at all.

Chair Gabrieli recognized that the following representatives from each institution who were present and available to answer questions: Todd Leach, Merrimack College and Chancellor Emeritus of the University System of New Hampshire; Marisa Kelly, President of Suffolk University; and Rick Oches, Provost and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs at Suffolk University. Chair Gabrieli then invited the representatives to address the Board.

Mr. Leach stated that, as a former NECHE commissioner, he had participated in discussions regarding reduced-credit degrees and believed that the NECHE process had carefully considered the issues raised during public comment. He stated that NECHE had concluded that the pathway could be allowed with safeguards, including transparency and the ability for students to move from the reduced-credit program to a traditional 120-credit program. Mr. Leach stated that Merrimack's proposals contained those safeguards and argued that higher education must respond to students and families who have difficulty affording four years of study. He also stated that not all bachelor's degrees have identical market value simply because they are 120-credit degrees, and that transparency is important so students understand what the option is and is not.

Merrimack Provost Sean Condon stated that Merrimack faculty had begun work five years earlier to rethink how to create a new kind of bachelor's degree from the ground up, with the goal of preserving academic quality while reducing the overall cost of earning a bachelor's degree. He stated that Merrimack's Faculty Senate voted in September 2022 with 91% support

for the proposal. He emphasized that the core requirements for the 96-credit degree are the same as Merrimack's 124-credit degree and stated that the proposal balances core and major requirements, allows students to proceed at the traditional academic pace while graduating sooner, preserves opportunities for internships and campus engagement, and allows students to move between three-year and four-year pathways as needed.

Suffolk University Provost Rick Oches stated that Suffolk's proposal is for a reduced-credit applied bachelor's program in Healthcare Administration and Innovation. He explained that faculty across Suffolk's College of Arts and Sciences, Sawyer Business School, and Law School worked to create a purposefully designed applied bachelor's degree program in response to public demand for a more efficient, lower-cost pathway to a bachelor's degree and a career. Provost Oches stated that Suffolk targeted a rapidly growing Massachusetts employment sector with high demand for well-educated, technically skilled graduates. He further stated that the program combines liberal arts and sciences perspectives with technical business skills and a required internship, and that the pilot would assess student learning, retention, graduation, workforce readiness, career placement, earnings, and student satisfaction before any expansion is considered.

Suffolk University President Marisa Kelly stated that she was confident in the academic quality of Suffolk's proposed 94-credit degree and the need to assess outcomes if Suffolk is allowed to pursue the pilot.

Chair Gabrieli then opened the discussion for Board questions and comments. He noted that the motions were carefully developed and included more than simple approval. Chair Gabrieli explained that the institutions would be required to undergo NECHE site visits with Department participation, submit annual reports, and participate in an evaluation framework. He further explained that the pilot programs could be discontinued, extended, or permanently approved depending on Department's evaluation of evidence-based outcomes—adding that the Commissioner must develop the evaluation framework and bring to the Board for approval. Chair Gabrieli stated that an evaluation of the pilots ultimately could lead to extension of the pilot period, permanent approval at the participating institutions, broader availability, or discontinuation, depending on evidence. He emphasized affordability, disclosure, evaluation, and individual student informed consent, and stated that the Board was not voting on whether reduced-credit degrees should become widespread across all higher education.

Member Battaglini asked Provost Condon how Merrimack could expect the same outcomes from a program with approximately 25% fewer classes and whether students would choose the four-year program if the outcomes were the same. She also asked how Merrimack would explain possible pitfalls to students, including uncertainty regarding graduate school admission, employment, and competition with traditional degree holders. Provost Condon stated that students choose colleges and programs for many reasons and that Merrimack's proposal would provide students with an option and a pathway to move between three-year and four-year programs. On graduate school, he stated that graduate programs would need to decide how to treat applied bachelor's degrees below 120 credits but noted that no college guarantees admission to medical school, law school, doctoral programs, or other graduate programs. Mr. Leach added that NECHE had taken a conservative approach by requiring the applied bachelor's prefix and specific disclosure language regarding the pilot, financial aid, graduate

study, and workforce considerations.

Member Walczak stated that reduced-credit degrees exist in many states and that Massachusetts is considering the concept through an applied baccalaureate designation to distinguish it from traditional four-year degrees. Drawing on his own experience as a first-generation college student who worked throughout college, he stated that the requirement to reach 120 credits could become a barrier when courses needed to complete the credit total were not directly related to employment. He stated that he supports lifelong learning and the requirement that students have a pathway from an applied bachelor's degree to a traditional four-year bachelor's degree, and he stated that he would vote in favor of allowing the pilot to move forward.

Member Allen thanked those who provided public comments and written testimony, stating that the Board was listening and taking the invitation to think and learn seriously. She stated that she has advocated for three-year degrees even in the context of Ivy League universities and therefore did not view the issue as inherently creating higher education stratification. Member Allen identified two major issues: whether the proposed designs could deliver learning equivalent to a four-year degree and whether the pilots would generate the evidence needed for the Board to make future decisions. She stated that she was prepared to defer to the faculties of the two institutions on curriculum design in the context of a pilot, but asked Commissioner Ortega how the Board should shape the evaluation conversation and how questions regarding graduate school acceptance should be addressed.

Commissioner Ortega responded that the motions include conditions related to developing an evaluation process and engaging both external and internal stakeholders. He stated that the Department would bring a comprehensive evaluation framework back to the Board and that such a framework would help the Board determine what happens at the end of the pilot period, including whether to scale, reduce, or otherwise address the pilots. He also stated that national conversations are beginning among SHEEOs and other states regarding graduate admissions and employer understanding of reduced-credit credentials, and that the Department would participate in those conversations and bring them back to Massachusetts.

Member Cortez stated that he did not believe the Board was rushing because the issue had been under discussion for some time and the schools had also been developing their proposals over time. He stated that the Board should measure outcomes not only for the pilots, but also for conventional associate, bachelor's degree, and nondegree pathways. Member Cortez argued that the system already contains multiple tiers and credentials, including nondegree pathways and apprenticeship degrees, and that the focus should be on outcomes as defined by students. He stated that the proposed pilots appear to offer additional choice, preserve general education components, include strong experiential learning, and provide appropriate disclosures regarding pathways such as accounting, finance, marketing, and law school.

Member Conforme stated that she connected with Member Walczak's comments because, as a first-generation college student, she also had to work every summer and could not pursue internships, research opportunities, or unpaid experiences that often serve as bridges to jobs or graduate school. She asked how the institutions expected the proposals to improve outcomes for first-generation, Pell-eligible students, working adults, and similar students, and whether the

proposals could reduce equity gaps.

Mr. Leach responded that one important measurable outcome would be whether more students actually complete a degree rather than leaving after three years with debt and no credential. He stated that Merrimack embraces assessment and would not continue if the programs do not deliver expected results.

President Kelly responded that first-generation and Pell-eligible students are central to Suffolk's mission and noted Suffolk's tuition-free initiative for Boston Public Schools students from families making less than \$75,000. She stated that shortening the fourth year may improve graduation rates for students who struggle to complete their degree programs for financial reasons, but that this must be measured and tracked.

Provost Condon stated that Merrimack's mission has long included access for families in the greater Merrimack Valley and that a more focused curriculum may help improve graduation rates while being closely assessed.

Secretary Zrike stated that he appreciated the public comments and emphasized that students would have to willingly opt into the pilot programs. He stated that the Board has a responsibility to foster and encourage innovation in the spirit of better serving students, and that the two institutions offered an opportunity to learn from efforts intended to lower costs and student debt while allowing earlier entry into the workforce. Secretary Zrike stated that he intended to support the proposals as an opportunity for the Commonwealth to try something new, learn, and consider whether it could better serve students, especially first-generation college-going students.

Vice Chair Chernow thanked the Department for coordinating the public comments but stated that the process felt rushed, particularly because Board members had received the summary of public comment document the prior evening. She expressed concern not only about the two institutions, but also about broader impacts on the public higher education ecosystem and historically underserved students. Vice Chair Chernow stated that the proposals appeared to prioritize or target first-generation, low-income, and adult learners and raised concern that those students were being identified for a reduced-credit program. She also noted that UMass Amherst had previously stated it did not intend to pursue three-year degrees because its programs require time for research, capstone projects, and in-depth learning. Vice Chair Chernow asked Commissioner Ortega to explain the Board's oversight and evaluation role, including what it would mean to stop, continue, expand, or end a pilot.

Commissioner Ortega responded that the Department had established milestones and benchmarks regarding the cadence for exchanging information with the institutions, including yearly exchanges and other information requests as needed. He stated that it would be important to maintain close connection with the Board regarding any evaluation mechanism. Chair Gabrieli added that the motions require the evaluation plan to come back to the Board and require the Board, by the end of the five-year period, to vote specifically on whether to expand the pilots or not.

Citing her experience prioritizing student success as a UMass trustee, Member Burns stated that, if the pilots work, they work, and if not, the institutions can return to the traditional four-year degree. She said the Board should consider students and whether the pilots could help them

succeed with less debt and a more focused education.

Referencing his own experience as low-income, first-generation student, Student Member Hannigan stated that he did not believe he was in a position to tell students that these programs were not right for them. He stated that different students seek different outcomes from higher education, that higher education is not working for many students, and that the purpose of a pilot is to test whether new options may better serve some students. He stated that he would vote in support because he did not believe he could know the right choice for every student.

Member Battaglino stated that she continued to have serious concerns about using the term "innovation" for programs she considered lesser programs designed to serve historically underserved students with fewer courses, fewer experiences, and less academic rigor. She stated that affordability and access are important goals but should not be achieved by lessening the quality of programs for students who cannot afford traditional degrees. Member Battaglino stated that the risks remain uncertain- including risks related to graduate school admission, financial aid, employer acceptance, and competition with traditional degree holders. She also stated that only a small number of the approximately 400 comments she read supported the proposals and that 1,000 signatures had been gathered on a petition. She stated that the Board needed further discussion, careful conversations, and more research before proceeding.

Chair Gabrieli then turned to the votes. Chief Legal Counsel Papanikolaou advised that, although the two motions had been moved together for purposes of discussion, each motion should be moved and voted separately to ensure a clean record.

Hearing no further discussion, Chair Gabrieli called for a vote on Merrimack College's proposal, *BHE 26-67*. On a motion duly made and seconded, *BHE 26-67* 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
- Veronica Conforme – Yes
- Alex Cortez - Yes
- Michael Hannigan – Yes
- Bob LePage, Secretary of Education Designee – Yes
- Francesca Purcell – Yes
- Marjorie Ringrose – Yes
- Shannon Rudder – Abstain
- Bill Walczak – Yes

BHE 26-67

APPLICATION OF MERRIMACK COLLEGE SUBMITTED PURSUANT TO 610 CMR 16.00 TO AWARD THE FOLLOWING FOUR 96-CREDIT APPLIED BACCALAUREATE DEGREE PILOT PROGRAMS: APPLIED BACHELOR OF ARTS IN PSYCHOLOGY, APPLIED BACHELOR OF ARTS IN COMMUNICATION, APPLIED BACHELOR OF ARTS IN CRIMINAL JUSTICE, AND APPLIED BACHELOR OF SCIENCE IN BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

VOTED

The Board of Higher Education [BHE] hereby approves conditionally, pursuant to the BHE's Degree Granting Regulations for Pilot Proposals on Innovation, 610 CMR 16.00, the pilot program application of Merrimack College to offer and award the following 96-Credit Applied Baccalaureate Degree programs:

- Applied Bachelor of Arts in Psychology
- Applied Bachelor of Arts in Communication
- Applied Bachelor of Arts in Criminal Justice
- Applied Bachelor of Science in Business Administration

Based on a review of all materials submitted by the institution, including the New England Commission of Higher Education's (NECHE) conditional approval of the proposal, and in consideration of public comment received, pursuant to 610 CMR 16.10(1) initial approval of the pilot programs is for five (5) years and is subject to the additional following conditions:

1) Pursuant to 610 CMR 16.08(3), the institution must undergo an external review organized and conducted by NECHE, which includes the participation of Department staff and is scheduled within two years of the start of the programs. The institution must comply with any requests from Department staff for additional information and shall participate in any periodic inspections necessary to determine whether the programs meet the BHE's standards, see 610 CMR 16.08(3) and 610 CMR 2.05(5) and 2.09.

2) The institution shall prepare and submit annual status reports, as required pursuant to 610 CMR 16.09, and shall submit, upon request, any other information as may be requested by Department staff to help assess the institution's compliance with the BHE's regulatory requirements, the institution's progress in establishing the programs, and the Commissioner's development of the evaluation framework referenced below. See 610 CMR 16.09. The timing, format, and manner of said reports and information requests shall be prescribed by Commissioner.

Provided the BHE hereby charges the Commissioner to develop an evaluation framework, for BHE approval, over the next twelve months. The Commissioner shall work with the piloting institutions and stakeholders, including NECHE, the College-in-3 Exchange and others, to develop the evaluation framework. The institution, upon request, shall provide all necessary information to inform the Commissioner's development of the evaluation framework that will be used for the purpose of assessing overall and program-specific outcomes of applied baccalaureate degree pilot programs. The Commissioner shall submit the evaluation framework to the BHE for approval no later than June 2027. The evaluation framework shall, at a minimum:

- a. identify the appropriate measures and metrics to evaluate the progress and success of the pilot programs, provided that, at a minimum, success outcomes shall include "measures of persistence, graduation rates, total cost to students and subsequent employment and earnings outcomes" (610 CMR 16.07(12)), as well as an assessment of students' future eligibility for transfer opportunities and continued study 610 CMR 16.06(2)(g); and
- b. identify factors the BHE shall take into consideration in extending, concluding, or codifying the pilot pursuant to 610 CMR 16.11.

In accordance with 610 CMR 16.11, based on an evaluation of the authorized pilots and no later than June 2031, the Board will either: grant full approval to the programs by removing the pilot designation; extend conditional approval of the pilots for another period of time; consider future regulatory or policy changes to codify and scale the pilots; or otherwise work with the institution to phase out the pilots if unsuccessful.

Authority M.G.L. c. 69, § 30 et seq., 610 CMR 16.00

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

Hearing no further discussion, Chair Gabrieli called for a vote on Suffolk University's proposal, *BHE 26-68*. On a motion duly made and seconded, *BHE 26-68* 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
- Veronica Conforme – Yes
- Alex Cortez - Yes
- Michael Hannigan – Yes
- Bob LePage, Secretary of Education Designee – Yes
- Francesca Purcell – Yes
- Marjorie Ringrose – Yes
- Shannon Rudder – Abstain
- Bill Walczak – Yes

BHE 26-68 APPLICATION OF SUFFOLK UNIVERSITY SUBMITTED PURSUANT TO 610 CMR 16.00 TO AWARD THE FOLLOWING 94-CREDIT APPLIED BACCALAUREATE DEGREE PILOT PROGRAM: APPLIED BACHELOR OF SCIENCE IN HEALTHCARE ADMINISTRATION AND INNOVATION

VOTED

The Board of Higher Education (BHE) hereby approves conditionally pursuant to the BHE's Degree Granting Regulations for Pilot Proposals on Innovation, 610 CMR 16.00, the pilot program application of Suffolk University to offer and award a 94-credit Applied Bachelor of Science in Healthcare Administration and Innovation.

Based on a review of all materials submitted by the institution, including the New England Commission of Higher Education's (NECHE) conditional approval of the proposal, and in consideration of public comment received, pursuant to 610 CMR 16.10(1), initial approval of the pilot program is for five (5) years and is subject to the additional following conditions:

- 1) Pursuant to 610 CMR 16.08(3), the institution must undergo an external review organized and conducted by NECHE, which includes the participation of Department staff and is scheduled within two years of the start of the programs. The institution must comply with any requests from Department staff for additional information and shall participate in any periodic inspections necessary to determine whether the programs meet the BHE's standards, see 610 CMR 16.08(3) and 610 CMR 2.05(5) and 2.09.
- 2) The institution shall prepare and submit annual status reports, as required pursuant to 610 CMR 16.09, and shall submit, upon request, any other information as may be requested by

Department staff to help assess the institution's compliance with the BHE's regulatory requirements, the institution's progress in establishing the programs, and the Commissioner's development of the evaluation framework referenced below. See 610 CMR 16.09. The timing, format, and manner of said reports and information requests shall be prescribed by Commissioner.

Provided the BHE hereby charges the Commissioner to develop an evaluation framework, for BHE approval, over the next twelve months. The Commissioner shall work with the piloting institutions and stakeholders, including NECHE, the College-in-3 Exchange and others, to develop the evaluation framework. The institution, upon request, shall provide all necessary information to inform the Commissioner's development of the evaluation framework that will be used for the purpose of assessing overall and program-specific outcomes of applied baccalaureate degree pilot programs. The Commissioner shall submit the evaluation framework to the BHE for approval no later than June 2027. The evaluation framework shall, at a minimum:

- a. identify the appropriate measures and metrics to evaluate the progress and success of the pilot programs, provided that, at a minimum, success outcomes shall include "measures of persistence, graduation rates, total cost to students and subsequent employment and earnings outcomes" (610 CMR 16.07(12)), as well as an assessment of students' future eligibility for transfer opportunities and continued study 610 CMR 16.06(2)(g); and
- b. identify factors the BHE shall take into consideration in extending, concluding, or codifying the pilot pursuant to 610 CMR 16.11.

In accordance with 610 CMR 16.11, based on an evaluation of the authorized pilots and no later than June 2031, the Board will either: grant full approval to the programs by removing the pilot designation; extend conditional approval of the pilots for another period of time; consider future regulatory or policy changes to codify and scale the pilots; or otherwise work with the institution to phase out the pilots if unsuccessful.

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

Following the votes on *BHE 26-67* and *BHE 26-68*, Chair Gabrieli next introduced *BHE 26-69*, a motion to approve the Board's standard Delegation of Summer Authority to the Commissioner, which allows the Commissioner, in consultation with the Chair, to act on matters requiring action during the gap between today's meeting and the BHE's next regularly scheduled meeting in September 2026, with such actions reported back to the Board.

Hearing no further discussion, Chair Gabrieli called for a vote. On a motion duly made and seconded, *BHE 26-69* 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
- Veronica Conforme – Yes
- Alex Cortez - Yes
- Michael Hannigan – Yes
- Bob LePage, Secretary of Education Designee – Yes
- Francesca Purcell – Yes
- Marjorie Ringrose – Yes
- Shannon Rudder – Abstain
- Bill Walczak – Yes

BHE 26-69 DELEGATION OF SUMMER AUTHORITY TO THE COMMISSIONER

VOTED The Board of Higher Education (Board) delegates to the Commissioner, ex officio, until the next regularly scheduled meeting of the Board its authority to take such action, in consultation with and upon the advice of the Chair or Vice Chair of the Board, as is deemed necessary or desirable. The Commissioner shall report back to the Board on his exercise of this delegated authority.

Authority Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 15A, Section 6

Contact Constantia T. Papanikolaou, Chief Legal Counsel

Following the vote on BHE 26-69, Chair Gabrieli thanked Department staff, particularly Academic Affairs staff and Chief Legal Counsel Dena Papanikolaou, for the work involved in developing the regulation, motions, analyses, and detailed crosswalks. He also thanked Commissioner Ortega and his team, representatives of Suffolk University and Merrimack College, NECHE, and Board members for the extensive public discussion.

IV. OTHER BUSINESS

Commissioner Ortega recognized several leadership transitions among the public higher education institutions. He thanked Dr. John Cook, President of Springfield Technical Community College; Dr. Ellen Kennedy, President of Berkshire Community College; and Dr. Jamie Birge, President of Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, for their service as they stepped down from their institutional leadership roles. He welcomed Dr. Jennifer Cournoyer as the next President of Springfield Technical Community College, Dr. Hara Charlier as the next President of Berkshire Community College, and Dr. Diana Rogers-Adkinson as the next President of Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts. Commissioner Ortega also noted that Dr. Kennedy would serve as interim President of Cape Cod Community College for the next year as that institution begins its search process and thanked her for agreeing to serve in that transitional role.

Commissioner Ortega also recognized leadership transitions among the Councils of Presidents. He thanked Westfield State University President Linda Thompson for her service as chair of the Council of State University Presidents and noted that MassArt President Mary Grant would serve as chair for the upcoming academic year. He also noted that North Shore Community College President William Heineman would continue for another year as chair of the Council of Presidents of the Massachusetts Community Colleges.

Chair Gabrieli thanked Student Member Hannigan and Student Advisor Rosenkrantz for their active participation and for bringing student voices and lived experiences to the Board's discussions and expressed hope that their successors would sustain that level of engagement.

Chair Gabrieli then requested a motion to adjourn.

V. ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 12:30 p.m.

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