
BOARD SPOTLIGHT

Building on progress. Preparing for what comes next.

September 29, 2026

Massachusetts Board of Higher Education

MASSACHUSETTS
Department of
Higher Education

Overview

A shared record of progress and a clear view of the work ahead

01 **Commissioner Ortega: successes and reflections**

A period of extraordinary change, shared leadership and consequential progress.

02 **Massachusetts responded**

Historic investments expanded affordability and helped restore enrollment momentum.

03 **Interim Commissioner Santos: the next responsibility**

Building the capabilities needed to deliver the Board’s priorities for lifelong learners.

TWO PERSPECTIVES

Reflection on the progress achieved

A forward view of the capabilities required

DHE Member Presenting Today

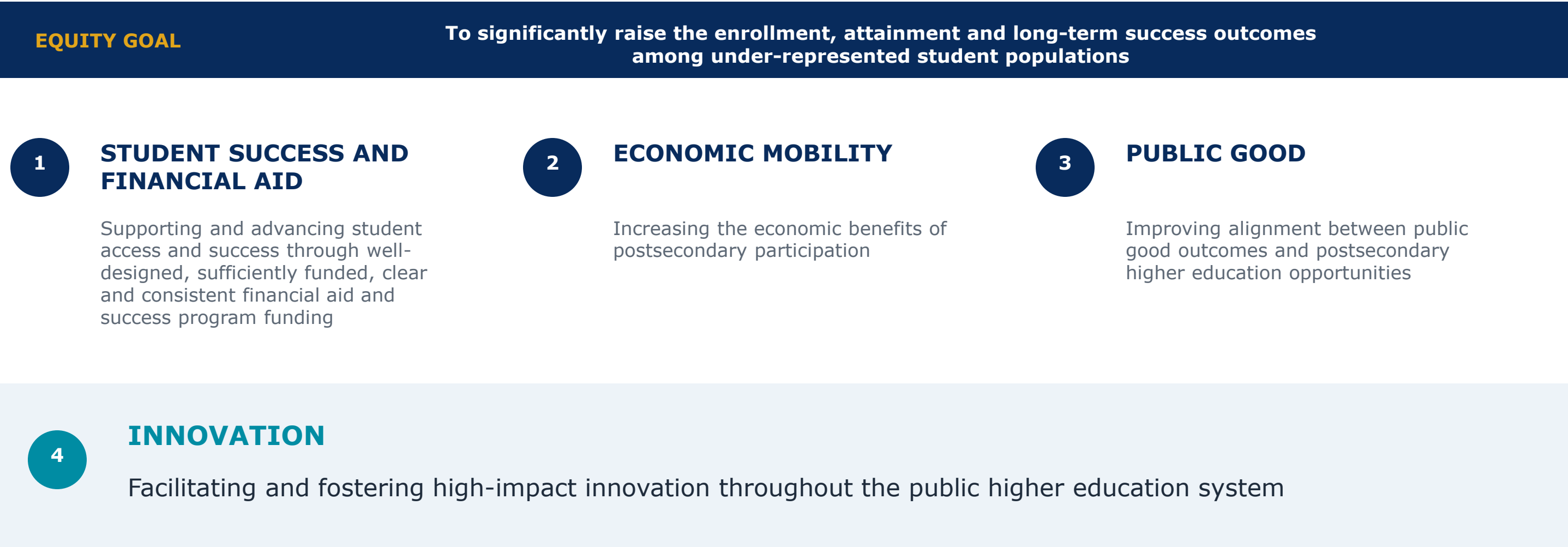


José Luis Santos, Ph.D.

Senior Deputy Commissioner

Interim Commissioner effective October 1, 2026

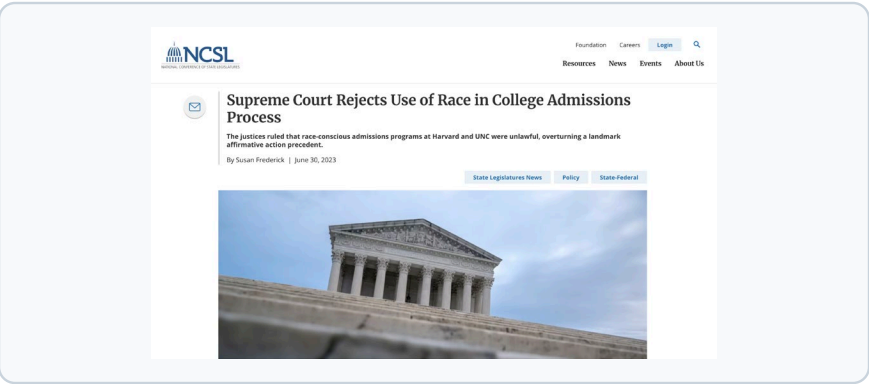
The Board’s priorities have provided a durable framework



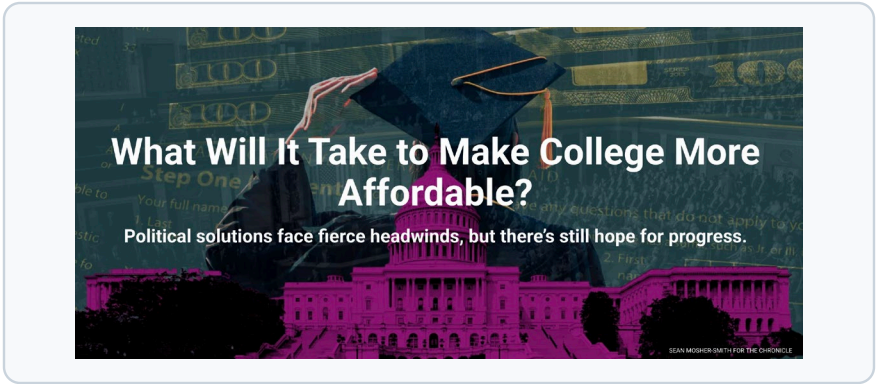
The priorities connect policy choices to the outcomes learners and the Commonwealth need.

Higher education faced sustained pressure from multiple directions

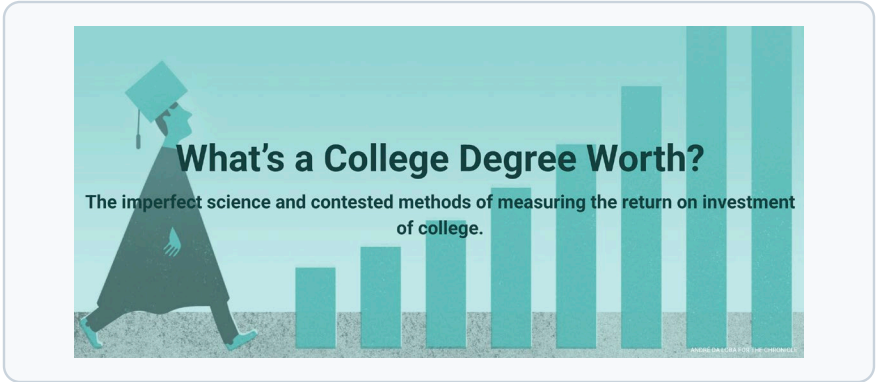
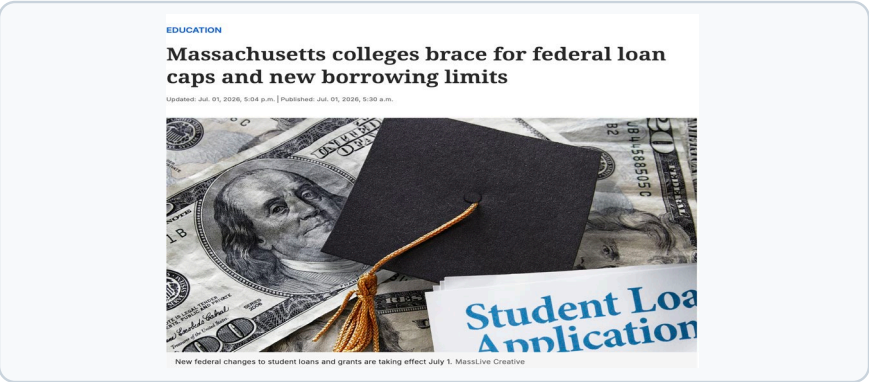
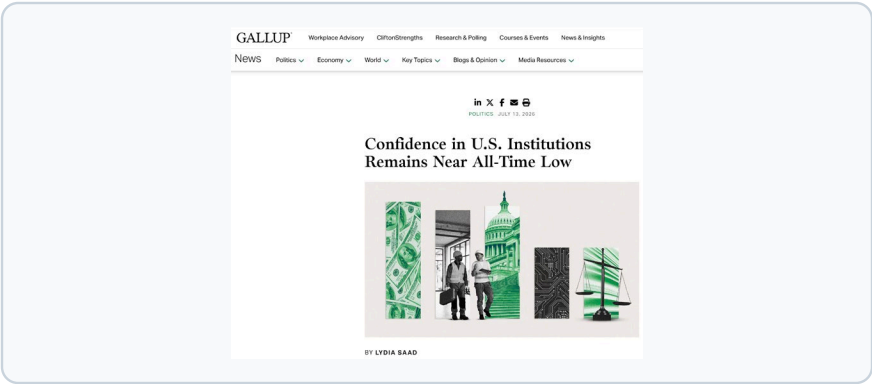
LEGAL + FEDERAL POLICY



AFFORDABILITY + VALUE



CONFIDENCE + INSTITUTIONAL PRESSURE



The pace of change required a coordinated response from the Board, the Administration, institutions and DHE.

Massachusetts responded by expanding opportunity

The state chose sustained public investment while many learners questioned whether college remained within reach.



The policy response widened the front door to higher education.

Public college enrollment has returned to pre-pandemic levels

Fall 2025 preliminary data

172,499

Undergraduate students
across public higher
education

Fall 2025

86,321

Students enrolled at
community colleges

Fall 2025

+38.5%

Community college
enrollment growth since
fall 2022

Strongest growth in the system

First-time community college enrollment increased 22.7% from fall 2024 and 69.0% since fall 2022.

Source: Commissioner Ortega, FY27 House 2 testimony, March 23, 2026

Shared leadership created a strong foundation for the next phase

The Commonwealth’s progress reflects sustained partnership

BOARD + DHE

Set durable priorities and maintained focus on equity

ADMINISTRATION +
LEGISLATURE

Backed policy commitments with historic investment

CAMPUSES + PARTNERS

Turned policy into opportunity for learners across Massachusetts

THE HANDOFF

Massachusetts enters the next phase from a position of strength.

The work ahead builds on sustained leadership and shared commitment.

A STRONG FOUNDATION CREATES THE NEXT RESPONSIBILITY

Continue the progress. Strengthen the system around it.

The next phase centers lifelong learners and builds the capabilities needed to deliver the Board's priorities at scale.

Leadership transition | October 1, 2026

The next phase organizes DHE around the Board’s priorities

BOARD-APPROVED LANGUAGE

STUDENT SUCCESS AND
FINANCIAL AID

Supporting and advancing student access and success through well-designed, sufficiently funded, clear and consistent financial aid and success program funding

ECONOMIC MOBILITY

Increasing the economic benefits of postsecondary participation

PUBLIC GOOD

Improving alignment between public good outcomes and postsecondary higher education opportunities

INNOVATION

Facilitating and fostering high-impact innovation throughout the public higher education system

Equity shapes how we define success and whose experience guides the work.

Historic scale requires a modern financial aid operation

WHAT CHANGED

Massachusetts expanded the scale and reach of financial aid

More students now rely on a larger and more complex set of programs, managed by the Office of Student Financial Assistance (OSFA)

WHAT THE NEXT PHASE REQUIRES

The infrastructure around financial aid must keep pace

- Clear operating structures
- Sufficient leadership and staffing
- Modern technology and internal systems
- A simpler student and institutional experience

Modernization protects the Commonwealth’s investment and improves how learners experience it.

A modern OSFA connects policy, delivery, stakeholder experience and results

The operating model creates a continuous cycle of delivery, learning and improvement.



Financial aid administration becomes a continuous cycle of delivery, engagement, measurement and improvement.

Four capabilities will support reliable delivery and continuous improvement

01 LEADERSHIP + ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY

Clear executive accountability, sufficient program capacity and cross-trained coverage for a larger portfolio.

02 PROCESS, CONTROLS + ACCOUNTABILITY

Documented workflows, clear ownership, reliable calendars and fewer single points of failure.

03 TECHNOLOGY, DATA + BUSINESS INTELLIGENCE

A modern platform, usable performance information and less manual work for staff and institutions.

04 COMMUNICATION + STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Clearer guidance and regular input from learners, campuses and partners to improve service and programs.

The operating model must make strong performance repeatable rather than dependent on individual effort.

Financial aid is the first proof point of a broader modernization agenda

Modernization strengthens the infrastructure behind priorities that are changing how learners experience higher education.

FINANCIAL AID

Modernize operations, program capacity, service and the learner experience.

FINANCIAL AID REDESIGN

Simplify programs and align them with learner needs and available resources.

EARLY COLLEGE

Support continued growth with dedicated leadership and stronger infrastructure.

TRANSFER

Reduce friction and make pathways easier for learners to navigate.

TECHNOLOGY PLATFORM

Build the secure, flexible foundation for financial aid delivery, data and service.

INNOVATION CAPACITY

Use the new platform to test, improve and expand services that respond to learner needs.

Modernization optimizes the operating foundation. Innovation expands what our platform and service model can deliver.

Innovation helps DHE improve today’s systems and build what learners need next

Innovation is both a Board priority and a capability that advances the other priorities.

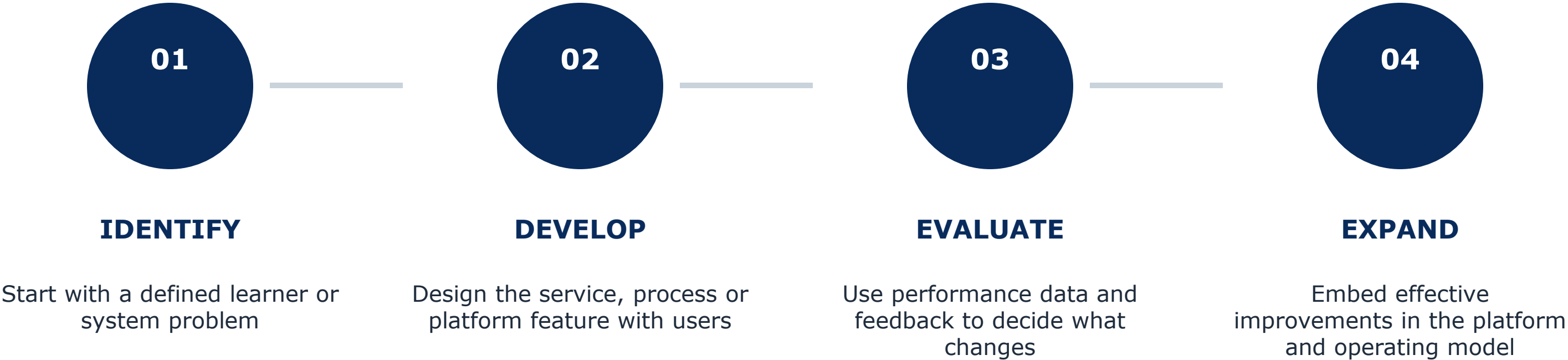
01	02	03
IMPROVE THE CORE	BUILD NEW MODELS	SPREAD WHAT WORKS
Redesign services, processes and technology when existing approaches create friction or cannot meet current demand.	Develop solutions with campuses, employers and learners when the system needs a new approach.	Use evidence to refine promising approaches, support adoption and extend their reach across the Commonwealth.

WHERE THIS SHOWS UP

The financial aid platform and service model, cooperative education, three-year degrees, transfer and Early College

Innovation gives DHE a disciplined way to respond as learner needs, technology and the economy change.

Innovation turns the modern platform into better services over time



Modernization provides the foundation; product ownership and evidence turn ideas into durable improvements.

Near-term commitments will stabilize delivery and build toward transformation

STABILIZE

Add leadership and capacity while strengthening ownership, documentation, controls, and operating discipline.

MODERNIZE

Define business and technical ownership, then build a simpler platform and service experience.

ENGAGE

Create regular feedback with campuses, partners and learners to guide program and service improvement.

MEASURE + IMPROVE

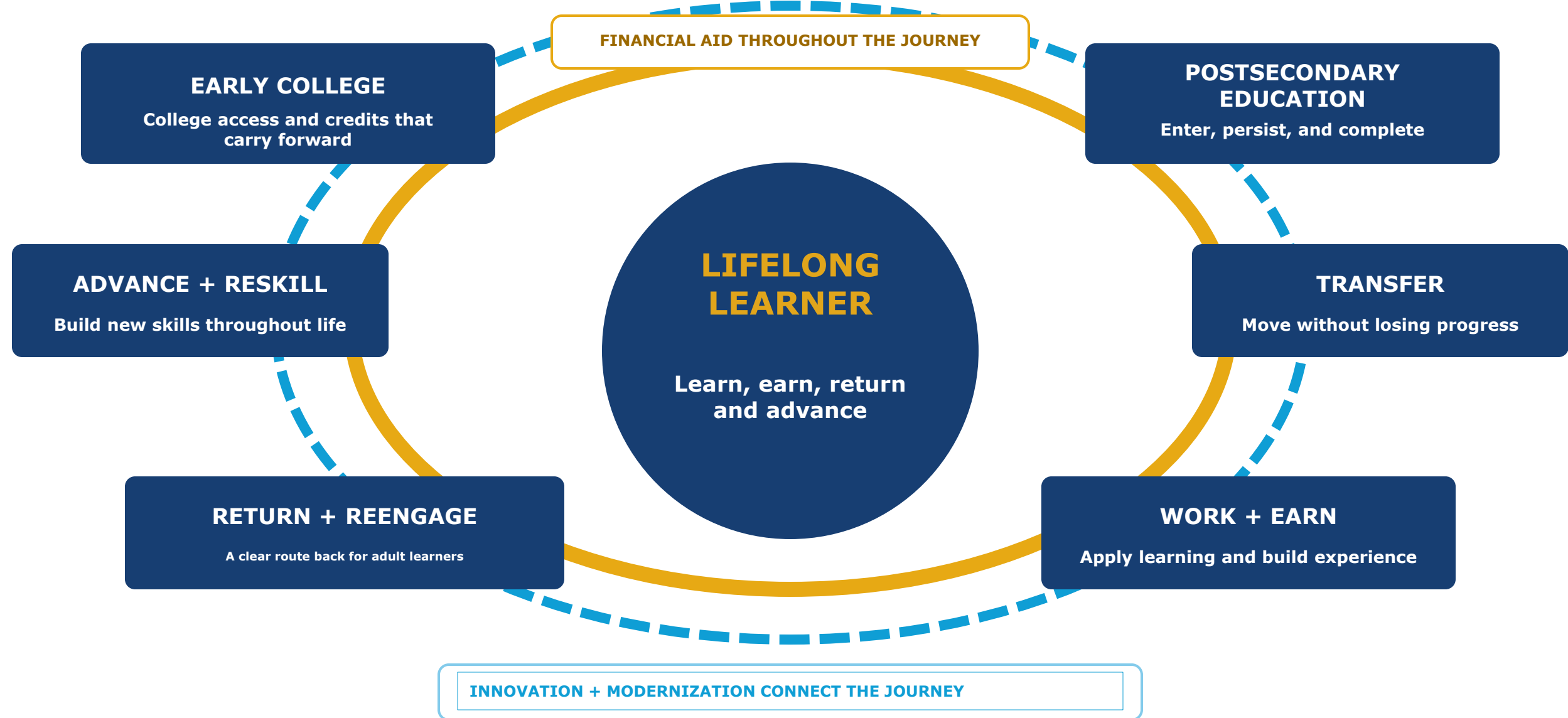
Build the business intelligence to understand reach, delivery, learner experience and program impact.

The Board will see progress through clearer accountability, stronger execution and measurable improvement.

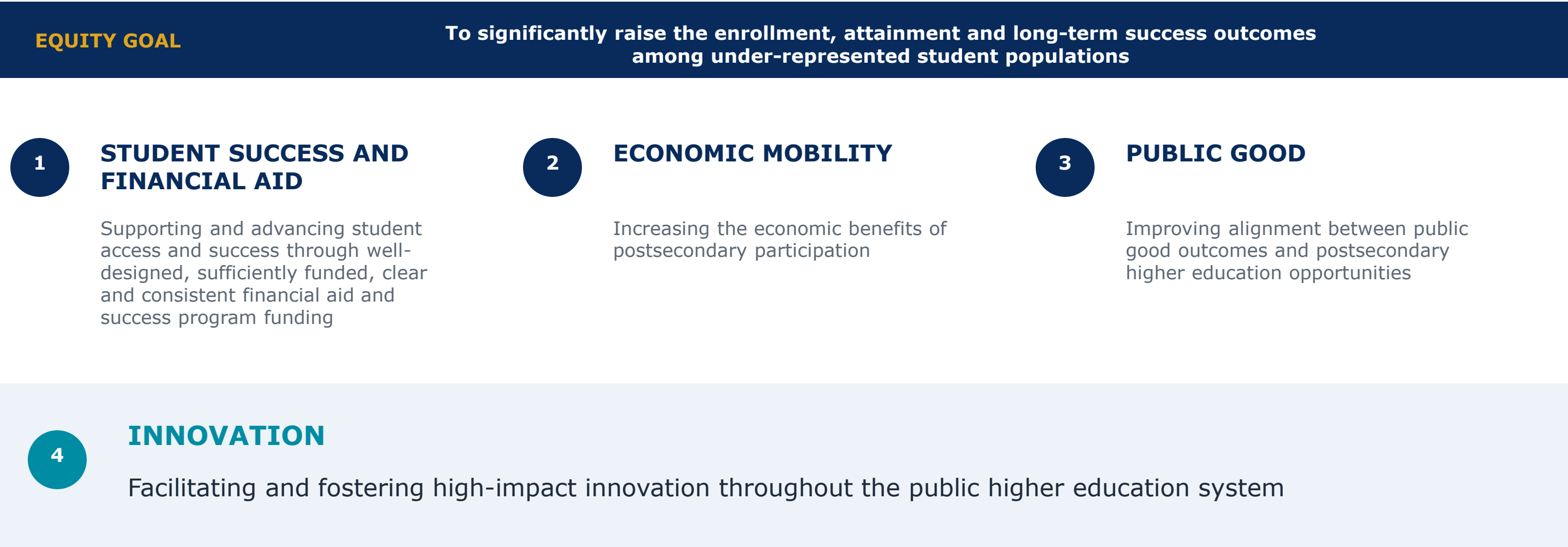
The lifelong learner journey has multiple entry and return points

Meet learners where they are, support each transition and make return possible

DHE programs support key stages. The next model must connect them and close the gaps between them.



The Board’s priorities have provided a durable framework



The priorities connect policy choices to the outcomes learners and the Commonwealth need.

UPDATE

**Building on progress.
Strengthening what comes next.**