



CoP Remarks on Behalf of the State University System to the Board of Higher Education

September 29, 2026

Good morning, Chairman Gabrieli, Secretary Zrike, Commissioner Ortega, Deputy Commissioner Santos, and members of the Board of Higher Education. On behalf of the State Universities Council of Presidents, I'm delighted to have the opportunity to provide some brief comments and to recognize and thank Noe Ortega for his service as Commissioner of Higher Education.

Noe, when you arrived in Massachusetts nearly four years ago, you came at a consequential moment for public higher education. We were emerging from the pandemic, state support was at a crossroads, campus enrollments had declined, and questions about the value of college degrees were becoming more pronounced.

There was a growing recognition that if Massachusetts was going to remain a national leader in education, we needed to think differently about college access, affordability, and student success. Four years later, the landscape looks remarkably different.

During your tenure, state investment in financial aid more than doubled. MassReconnect and free community college opened doors for thousands of students. And MASSGrant Plus made our public four-year institutions tuition and fee-free for Pell-eligible students while lowering costs for middle-income families. Those are significant accomplishments, and they will be an important part of your legacy.

But from our perspective, another part of that legacy is equally important. Commissioner Ortega you understood that leading public higher education is ultimately an exercise in partnership and communication. There were times when the Department and our campuses did not see an issue the same way. But even when we disagreed, the conversation continued. Noe recognizes that statewide leadership and campus autonomy do not have to compete with one another. At their best, they strengthen one another.

Noe, you leave the Massachusetts public higher education system better than you found it, and there are few greater measures of public service than that. We thank you for your service, your

partnership, and your friendship, and we wish you and your family all the best in this next chapter.

As we look ahead, the State University presidents remain committed to working in partnership with this Board, Interim Commissioner Santos, and the Department of Higher Education on the important work before us.

Our priorities are clear: expanding access and affordability, growing enrollment, providing high-quality educational opportunities that lead to meaningful careers and lives, and ensuring that our students have the support they need to succeed. That means continuing to expand financial aid so all public higher education students benefit, strengthening MassTransfer and the pathways from our community colleges to four-year institutions, and building on the State University SUCCESS program. This investment has helped to support and strengthen enrollments across the system.

I want to acknowledge the recent *Boston Globe* College Town piece about the future of public higher education in Massachusetts. The piece raises important questions about enrollment, demographics, infrastructure, and how our institutions might continue to evolve in order to serve future generations of students and provide the Commonwealth with an educated citizenry and workforce. We welcome that conversation. But we cannot get lost in the discussion. Our State Universities, and the entire public higher education system, are changing lives, offering pathways to social and economic mobility, and are engines of the Massachusetts economy.

We are proud that our public higher education system reflects the diversity of the Commonwealth itself. We serve students and communities in every region of Massachusetts. Many of our students are the first in their families to attend college, and our institutions provide them with an affordable and high quality pathway not only to a degree, but also to greater economic mobility.

We are gateways to access, opportunity, and success. Our state universities educate the Commonwealth's teachers, nurses, scientists, entrepreneurs, artists, designers, and future leaders. Their successes make our communities richer and fuel the workforce and civic pipelines that keep the Commonwealth strong.

That is why the future of public higher education matters so much. We should think boldly about that future, not from a place of decline or retreat, but from a position of confidence in our mission and ambition for what comes next. We will continue to build upon the individual strengths and successes of our institutions while finding new ways to collaborate, innovate, and respond to the changing needs of our students, our communities, and our economy.

Massachusetts is fortunate to have a deep and diverse higher education ecosystem, with outstanding public and private institutions—something that has long set the Commonwealth apart.

As we look for a new commissioner and confront the challenges and opportunities ahead, we should do so with confidence in what we have built, pride in the students we serve, and a shared commitment to making an already strong system even stronger for the next generation.

One way in which we continue to do this is through the BRIGHT Act, the first public higher education bond bill in two decades. The legislation represents a generational investment of as much as \$4.2 billion to address deferred maintenance, critical repairs, modernization, and other capital needs across the Commonwealth's 29 public higher education campuses.

For our state universities, the need is significant and increasingly urgent. Too many of our students are still learning in facilities designed for another era. In many cases, our campuses are operating in a “chalkboard reality,” while the students entering our doors have spent their high school years learning with smart boards, interactive technology, modern laboratories, and collaborative digital tools. We cannot ask our public universities to prepare students for a rapidly changing economy while educating them in facilities that have not kept pace with that change.

The BRIGHT Act gives the Commonwealth an opportunity to begin changing that reality. This is not simply an investment in buildings. It is an investment in our students, in the quality of the education we provide, the communities our campuses serve, and the economic future of Massachusetts. Moreover, the BRIGHT Act will ensure that the costs of necessary improvements to our campuses do not get passed on to our students.

Here at MassArt, the Tower Building is a powerful example of why these investments matter. For decades, MassArt has responsibly and creatively managed a building with significant design deficiencies. But a project of this magnitude cannot be addressed through year-to-year patchwork fixes or undertaken by one institution alone. It requires a true partnership with the Commonwealth and a future-focused investment.

The bill is still awaiting final legislative action, and we remain hopeful that it will reach the Governor's desk before the end of the year. We thank the Board for advocating for final passage of the BRIGHT Act before the end of the legislative season. While we have made tremendous progress toward this long-overdue investment—we have to finish the job.

I also want to take a moment to tell you about a few things happening on our campus at MassArt. On September 17th, in quintessential MassArt fashion, we celebrated Constitution Day by hosting a day of creating and making activities that used the tools of art and design to engage our

community in discussion about democracy, our civic responsibilities, the importance of the constitution and voting.

We held our third annual and hugely successful MassArt Night Market in partnership with the Downtown Boston Business Alliance—bringing downtown crossing to life and tonight we are opening two incredible new exhibits at the MassArt Art Museum: the Turkish artist Banu Cennotoğlu presents *right?*, which examines the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Robert Lazzarini’s exhibition *metes and bounds*, includes new works originally conceived for the United States Pavilion at the 2026 Venice Biennale.

I would like to conclude my remarks on a hopeful note—one that we need right now. We, all of us, do this work because we believe deeply in our students and the power and the impact of higher education to change lives.

Every day on each of our campuses, we have remarkable stories to share, sometimes they are national news breakers such as President Barack Obama sitting down for a conversation with Doris Kearns Goodwin, and sometimes, they are quieter, like the moments of joy we get to witness during move-in days as we welcome a new and hopeful incoming class. Each story reminds us why this work matters.

MassArt was deliberately founded by the Commonwealth during a period of tremendous technological and economic change to address the challenges and opportunities of the Industrial Revolution by emphasizing human ingenuity and creativity. It was a big idea then, and it is an ideal worth nurturing today.

We are at a similar moment today. Artificial Intelligence is transforming how we work, learn, and live. As we do at MassArt and across our entire public higher education system every day, we can meet this moment by emphasizing those things that remain uniquely human: collaboration, empathy, imagination, and creativity.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the Board, for providing me the opportunity to offer this report.

Commissioner Ortega, thank you for your partnership and your work with us over the past four years. And congratulations, Dr. Santos, on your appointment as Acting Commissioner of the Department of Higher Education.

Thank you. I am happy to answer any questions.