



Massachusetts Board of Higher Education Community College President's Report

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Chair, Community College Council of Presidents

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Chair Gabrieli, Assistant Secretary LePage, Commissioner Ortega, and members of the Board: thank you for having me today.

Before I begin my remarks, I would be remiss if I didn't comment on an important piece of the presentation from this morning. While it is admirable that we are promoting that college is possible, we are very concerned that shouting from the treetops that our public four-year institutions are free for certain students based on income will further deplete very limited financial aid for the whole system.

This year, the DHE nearly ran out of financial aid for the public institutions. Next year, there is no anticipated large increase in financial aid funding.

While the Free Community College program is now codified in state statute, and key legislative leaders have indicated they will fund the program should the annual appropriation run short, it should be noted that the MASSGrant Plus Expansion program is not recognized by the Legislature and lacks any type of guarantee beyond what is appropriated each year. So again, not to take away from the importance of marketing to would-be students, but we ought to be cautious about over-promising to students who are most in need of support.

When I gave my first remarks to this Board last fall, I never expected the time to pass quite so quickly – and yet we have already come to my last meeting as Chair. I have enjoyed my time updating you all on the work happening at our colleges during one of the most eventful and interesting times for the Commonwealth's community colleges, and am excited to turn my tenure over to our incoming Chair, President Bill Heineman from North Shore Community College who will take over next month.

As anyone who has spent time on a college campus knows, commencement season is one of the greatest joys of the work that we do – a celebration of all of the hard work our students have put into their hopes and dreams. On Thursday, I will lead a commencement for more than 1,200 students from Quinsigamond Community College – and as I wrote earlier this month in the Telegram & Gazette, this year's commencement ceremony holds an even deeper meaning: our students have navigated a national landscape where the value of education has been questioned; where economic pressures have tested their resolve; and where balancing work, family, financial challenges and school has demanded unparalleled grit and resolve.

I know I speak for all of my fellow presidents when I say how proud we are of our graduates and what an honor it is to watch our students walk across our stages with their associate degrees. To the Board, the Secretary, Commissioner, and to everyone who has helped our students succeed: thank you.

In the midst of the season's joy, we are also facing a fundamental challenge to student access. Earlier this month, the US House Education and the Workforce Committee released budget reconciliation language that would dramatically change Pell Grant eligibility, shifting per-semester enrollment for Pell Grant eligibility to 7.5 credits and redefining full-time status as 15 credits. **In Massachusetts alone, our preliminary data show a significant population of students would be impacted, and removing their Pell eligibility would result in a dramatic loss of Pell funds.** Further, redefining full-time status as 15 credits would mean that a large pool of students at our schools would lose out on the full Pell benefit. These changes would be devastating for our students, our colleges, and our state at an already precarious economic time.

Our college presidents have called on the Massachusetts delegation to oppose these changes, and I raise the importance of protecting Pell Grant access here so that you all know what a significant problem this could be for our students, the future of Free Community College, and the future of true student access to a community college education.

As we move through the state budget cycle, we continue to advocate for additional funding for do every spring, we continue to advocate for SUCCESS. As I've noted before, Free Community College is our access strategy, and SUCCESS is our completion strategy – without additional SUCCESS funding, the new students enrolled at our colleges are less likely to be successful in their studies.

Finally, we applaud the Senate for including language to undertake a salary study on behalf of our faculty and professional staff. We view this as a first step in raising educator pay, and hope that this language will be retained in the conference committee budget.

Thank you again for the time – I am happy to take any questions you might have.