



State Universities
of Massachusetts

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

October 22, 2024

Introduction

Good Morning, Chairman Gabrieli, Secretary Tutwiler, Commissioner Ortega, and members of the Board of Higher Education. On behalf of the State Universities Council of Presidents, thank you for this opportunity to provide an update on the Massachusetts State University System. I am pleased to be sharing my first segmental report as the chair of the State Universities Council of Presidents, and I look forward to collaborating with this Board, along with the EOE and the DHE, during my two-year term.

Starting my fourth year as President, I am continuously impressed with the people I work with. The enthusiasm and dedication I encounter is inspiring.

It reminds me that, for many of us, working at Westfield State University is a part of who we are. We are proud of what we do here.

For decades I have been a fervent leader and advocate of higher education, and the health of our citizenry. Prior to joining the Westfield State community in July 2021, I served as dean of the College of Nursing and Health Sciences at University of Massachusetts Boston.

I have also held leadership positions in public policy, occupational medicine and safety, HIV prevention, and substance use and abuse prevention. I served as special secretary of children, youth, and families, where I developed programs and policies to improve the quality of care for vulnerable populations of children.

I take pride in building partnerships and coalitions that lead to the betterment of our communities. I am grateful for the opportunity to have a leadership role in our COP.

Enrollment

You just heard Commissioner Ortega present campus early enrollment numbers for this academic year. It will come as no surprise that my colleagues and I are keenly aware of the enrollment challenges facing all of our institutions as a result of demographic declines in the Northeast along with the lingering impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the growing number of people questioning whether the cost of college is worth the potential return on investment in today's job market. Nevertheless, we remain optimistic about the future of our public higher education system in the Commonwealth and our system-wide efforts to stabilize our student enrollment. Even as enrollments in the Commonwealth's K-12 schools continue to decline and there are challenges in postsecondary student enrollment, I am happy to report that the state universities are maintaining steady enrollment numbers this year and I would like to share some encouraging highlights from across our system.

- Framingham State University experienced an 18% increase in new first year students with 26% of the incoming class identifying as Hispanic and 51% identifying as BIPOC.
- At MassArt, 26% of their incoming undergraduates are first generation college students, and this cohort represents students from 27 states and 17 countries.
- At Worcester State University, their enrollment increased over last year, and 47% of the incoming class identifies as ALANA/BIPOC, which is the highest in University history.
- Mass Maritime welcomed its largest incoming class ever with a 25% increase over last year. They also have the largest incoming class of women and the largest incoming class of students of color. And I would be remiss if I did not mention the new training ship that arrived last week at the Academy. This vessel is designed to provide a state-of-the-art training platform that ensures the United States continues to set the world standard in maritime training. The ship has space to train up to 600 cadets at sea, maximizing the capability of the ship and its mission to provide cadets with a world-class education. Congratulations to Admiral McDonald for being the envy of the maritime world!

- At Salem State University, the total enrollment is up for the first time since 2012 with the largest incoming undergraduate class in several years, with 30% of new students identified as Hispanic.

And at Westfield State University, we saw a nearly 20% increase in new student enrollment, with over 44% of the new students self-identifying as first-generation students.

We also increased the number of international students. This fall we enrolled 24 new students from countries such as Angola, Brazil, Canada, China, Ethiopia, Finland, Germany, Greece, India, Jamaica, Japan, Lebanon, Nepal, Nicaragua, Serbia, South Korea, and Zimbabwe.

For the fall semester we have nine Westfield State students studying abroad. Two are in Ireland, three are in Italy, two are in Spain, one is in the Netherlands, and one is in Japan. Sixteen students are confirmed for 2025 Winter and Spring study abroad programs and are planning to go to Australia, Czechia, the United Kingdom, Italy, and Iceland.

We will encourage more of our students to explore the world. Thinking globally and acting locally is not just a cliché. We intend to make this a fundamental part of the Westfield State University experience.

As these campus highlights indicate, our institutions are successfully fulfilling our mission to provide access to higher education opportunities for traditionally underserved populations.

Enrollment is more than recruiting students in the first year, we must also retain them to graduation. As shown in the presentation on student success trends, we have more work to do in order to increase degree attainment within 6 years. The academic supports that our students need to persist through college, as we expand access to new populations, are expensive, so we are grateful that the legislature included \$14 million in the state budget to extend the SUCCESS program to the state universities. We understand how beneficial these supports and services have been to our community college partners, and we are ready to invest these funds in proven retention strategies that create a welcoming campus culture with improved student engagement with faculty and the campus community.

I can speak to the value of investing in strategies that work on many campuses including:

individualized academic advising,

academic coaching,

tutoring and peer-mentoring,

along with early alert systems to help identify at-risk students.

Programs and activities such as these will help strengthen outcomes for our students facing similar challenges. We ask this board and your department to encourage and support our efforts to continue this program next year.

State Budget

During my time as president of Westfield State University, there have been life-changing investments in public higher education that have been made possible due to the dedicated revenue from the Fair Share surtax revenue.

Students who did not think earning a college degree would be possible for them to afford now find it is, in fact, possible due to the investments that are being made to address the total cost of attending our public institutions.

I would like to thank this Board and the DHE for your advocacy during the budget process and for the legislature for prioritizing public higher education in the FY25 state budget.

We are particularly grateful for the increases in the MASSGrant Plus program and the extension of the SUCCESS program to the state universities, which I mentioned earlier in my remarks.

Since the state universities are committed to providing high-quality and affordable pathways to students, we whole-heartedly thank this Board and the Department in your efforts to increase funding for the MASSGrant Plus and MASSGrant Plus Expansion programs. These aid programs allow us to cover tuition and fees and provide a \$1,200 allowance for books and supplies for students enrolled in public four-year colleges or universities whose families earn up to \$85,000 per year.

For families making between \$85,000 and \$100,000 per year, the costs for tuition and fees will be reduced by up to half of the student's out-of-pocket expenses. For fiscal year 2024 Westfield State has 938 students supported by MASSGrant Plus. Through MASSGrant Expansion we have 699 students. For fiscal year 2025, we have 1,037 students supported by MASSGrant Plus and 465 supported by MASSGrant Plus Expansion.

State University and Community College Collaboration

I will end my remarks with the recognition that collaboration between the community colleges, state universities and the department of higher education has never been more critical. With the launch of free community college for all this year, the state universities and community colleges presidents are discussing some new and innovative partnerships.

Earlier this month, the Community College and State University Council of Presidents met jointly at Quinsigamond Community College to discuss ways to partner in order to offer students seamless and affordable pathways from a 2-year to a 4-year degree. We talked about establishing system-wide joint admissions agreements, early college admission agreements between the two systems, pathways for community college students to live in state university on-campus housing, and maximizing the positive impact of the free community college initiative. We are committed to working with our community college partners to create a seamless system of public higher education for the students in the Commonwealth. We welcome you, the Department, and the Executive Office of Education to join us in this effort.

Conclusion

Thank you for providing me with the opportunity to share this update from our state universities. I am happy to answer any questions that you may have.