



State Universities  
of Massachusetts

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

**June 11, 2024**

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### **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 you with an update on the Massachusetts State University System.

Today serves as my final report as chair. It has been an honor to serve in this role representing all the state university students, faculty and staff in the Commonwealth. I want to thank the Board, Chairman Gabrieli, Commissioner Ortega, Secretary Tutwiler, my community college colleagues, President Vander Hooven, and the entire team at the Department of Higher Education, as they have been incredibly helpful on so many fronts including guidance on Salem State likely becoming the very first four year, public Hispanic Serving Institution in the Commonwealth, filling the Trustee vacancies on our Boards, and most importantly, implementing historic levels of financial aid and ensuring public higher education is accessible and affordable.

Senior Deputy Commissioner Clantha McCurdy recently gave the keynote at the Massachusetts State Universities School Counselors meeting hosted at Salem State. It was great to hear her describe the state's financial aid opportunities to all of the guidance counselors in attendance and that the DHE will be flexible to support as many students as possible. While still early in light of the FAFSA fiasco, the state universities are encouraged by early enrollment numbers. At Salem State, we are up in new student deposits for the first time in over a decade! I would strongly encourage a financial aid advertising blitz in the fall. Public higher education in Massachusetts is affordable again as a result of your efforts and the Fair Share funding.

Lastly, I would like to thank and acknowledge our segmental representative, Paul Mattera, who continues to serve as a trustee at Salem State University and has proven to be a long-valued supporter of the important work we do on our campuses.

As I step down as Chair of the COP, I would like to share some updates on the state budget and offer some optimism about the future of our public higher education system.

## **State Budget**

As you know, the Senate wrapped up their deliberations on the FY25 budget at the end of May, and it is now in Conference Committee to resolve the differences between the House and Senate.

Consistent with the consensus revenue agreement reached with the Administration and Legislature, the FY25 budget will include \$1.3 billion in Fair Share revenues to invest in our public education system and improve the state's transportation infrastructure. This budget represents the second year where this source of revenue is available, and the Council of Presidents is grateful for this continued, historic investments in public higher education. Continued investments in our students and campus infrastructures are needed not only for the personal growth of our students, but also for the continued economic growth of the Commonwealth and the regions we serve.

We also greatly appreciate that the House and Senate provide campus line items with a base appropriation that rolls all FY24 campus funding – plus the incremental salary increase obligations in our employee labor contracts – into our institution's line items for FY25.

At the same time, there were a few differences between the two budgets, and the Council of Presidents is advocating for the following items to be included in the Conference Committee report. These items are:

- extending the SUCCESS program to the state universities so our nine campuses can provide the critical wraparound support services that keep students on track to graduate;
- including \$10 million for a higher education persistence and basic needs program for state universities and community colleges to assist with student costs of attendance, including unanticipated expenses that may jeopardize a student's ability to continue their education program around transportation, food security, housing, and childcare;
- increasing the MassGrant Plus program for students attending our public higher education institutions to continue to break down financial barriers that make it difficult for the neediest students to attain a baccalaureate degree.

In addition to these items, we are also advocating for funding for our internship programs, our performance based funding formula, student mental health grants, the endowment incentive program, and the hunger free campus initiative.

Lastly, I would be remiss if I did not mention the need for capital funding for our campuses! Max Page is absolutely right, and we agree that the Fair Share funding should be used to make

these investments. While it is disappointing that neither the House nor the Senate budget makes significant investments in funding for deferred maintenance projects on our public higher education campuses, the presidents look forward to working with the Legislature on a proposal for the upcoming supplemental budget that utilizes surplus Fair Share dollars to support significant capital investments in our public higher education system. Our infrastructure needs are immense, in the billions really, yet the funding for much needed capital improvements does not keep up with the expense. Our students deserve to learn in 21<sup>st</sup> century spaces that are state of the art and match the excellence of our faculty and our programs. We look forward to working with the Administration to develop a new way to meet our infrastructure needs while keeping these costs off of the backs of our students.

## **Transitions**

At the end of this week, the Council of Presidents will have its annual business meeting at Mass Maritime. As part of our gathering, we will celebrate our colleague, as was just mentioned, **President Rich Lapidus**, as he starts his well-deserved retirement. During his nine-year tenure as President of Fitchburg State University, the university repeatedly scored as one of the top institutions in the state for promoting social mobility, according to US News and other ranking entities. Fitchburg's online footprint also expanded greatly, serving a national and international population. In particular, Fitchburg has seen huge growth in their international student population both online and in-person, largely tied to their graduate programs. In addition, under President Lapidus' leadership, Fitchburg saw the first graduates of their police program – believed to be the first of its kind in the nation – where students complete their bachelor's and master's degrees in five years with full certification to work as municipal police officers. President Lapidus also continued to form strong ties with the campus' host community of Fitchburg. For example, in 2016, the university purchased a long-vacant theater in downtown Fitchburg and invested millions to renovate space within the complex for use as a game design studio and an interdisciplinary idea lab. President Lapidus has much to be proud of as he steps down from his post, and we wish him all the best in this next stage of his life.

As we wish President Lapidus well, we also welcome **Dr. Donna Hodge** as our new colleague in the state university system. As the 12<sup>th</sup> President of Fitchburg State, Dr. Hodge will serve as the university's first woman president, bringing with her extensive experience, most recently culminating from her role as Vice President of Operations and Advancement at the Colorado State University Pueblo. While we will miss our dear colleague, President Lapidus, we look forward to working with Dr. Hodge when she takes the helm at Fitchburg. Dr. Hodge will also join us at our conference this week, and we look forward to welcoming her there.

## **Conclusion**

I will close with one final thank you to the Board for your attention, leadership and service to the students of Massachusetts. It has been an interesting two years serving as the chair of the Council of Presidents. Together, we have weathered a global pandemic and enrollment declines while also celebrating historic reinvestment into our public higher education system through the Fair Share and MassGrant Plus Expansion. It has been a somewhat wild and unprecedented time in higher education, but I continue to be optimistic for the years ahead and the difference we can make in both the lives of our students and the residents of the Commonwealth.

I am pleased to share that the state university presidents have selected **President Linda Thompson** of Westfield State University to chair the Council of Presidents next year. President Thompson has been an outstanding addition to the COP, and we welcome and encourage her strong leadership in the year ahead.

Thank you for providing me with the opportunity to share my final update from our state universities. I wish you all a great summer. We all need to recharge. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.