

**BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION
REQUEST FOR BOARD ACTION**

MOTION NO.: BHE 26-42
BOARD DATE: February 10, 2026

**APPROVAL AND ADOPTION OF 610 CMR 16.00: DEGREE GRANTING
REGULATIONS FOR PILOT PROPOSALS ON INNOVATION**

MOVED: The Board of Higher Education ("Board" or "BHE") having solicited and reviewed public comment in accordance with the Administrative Procedure Act, M.G.L. c. 30A, § 3, hereby adopts the following final regulation 610 CMR 16.00: Degree Granting Regulations for Pilot Proposals on Innovation, as set forth in Attachment A.

VOTED: Motion adopted by the BHE on 2/10/2026.

Authority: M.G.L. c. 15A, § 9(a) and (b); M.G.L. c. 69, § 30 et seq., and M.G.L. c. 30A, § 2; 950 CMR 20.00.

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Richard Riccardi, Deputy Commissioner for Academic Affairs and Student Success

Background

After review and an opportunity for discussion at its regularly scheduled meeting on October 28, 2025, the Board of Higher Education ("BHE" or "Board") voted (*BHE Motion 26-28*) to authorize the Commissioner of the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education ("Department" or "DHE") to solicit public comment on proposed regulation *610 CMR 16:00: Degree Granting Regulations for Pilot Proposals on Innovation*.

In furtherance of the Board's formally adopted "innovation-centered" strategic priority, the proposed regulation creates a pathway to allow the BHE to enhance its ability to continuously advance effectiveness in higher education by responsibly enabling opportunities for programmatic experimentation. As drafted, the regulation seeks to provide the Board with flexibility to modify or temporarily waive its own regulations or standards in those instances where existing BHE regulations may impede responsible experimentation in higher education offerings.

Specifically, 610 CMR 16.00 establishes a framework for the Board to carefully consider, advance, and evaluate "pilot proposals" – from public or independent institutions of higher education subject to the Board's jurisdiction – that 1) may be inconsistent with one or more specific BHE regulatory or policy requirement(s) related to an institution's degree-granting authority, but 2) are responsive to significant changes in society, demographics, technology, educational research, or expectations regarding post-secondary education. The criteria, requirements, and procedures set forth therein will allow for responsible experimentation and advance innovation within a controlled, monitored environment with the intention of broadening student access to sustainable degree-granting programs in high-demand fields.

Before presenting draft regulation 610 CMR 16.00 to the Board on October 28th for authorization to solicit public comment, Department staff engaged in extensive informal vetting of the proposed draft regulation with various segmental and institutional partners, as well as directly with Board members during prior BHE meetings. Notably, Department staff dedicated substantial time over the FY25 BHE meeting cycle on engagement in pilot proposal-related public deliberations with Board members – including no fewer than three (3) interactive presentations led by the Department's Chief Legal Counsel, in partnership with Academic Affairs and Student Success staff members.¹ These comprehensive discussions served as a foundation for the proposed

¹ Direct informal vetting with Board members included a "Presentation on BHE's Degree Granting Authority/Proposals for Reduced Credit Degrees" at the Board's regularly scheduled meeting on December 3, 2024; a Commissioner's Spotlight segment at the Board's April 8, 2025 meeting dedicated to

draft regulatory language that was unanimously approved by BHE in October 2025 for solicitation of public comment (*BHE Motion 26-28*).

Following the Board's vote on October 28th, the regulation was submitted to the Secretary of the Commonwealth's Office. Notice of the public comment period—which ran from November 21, 2025 to December 12, 2025—was published in the *Massachusetts Register* and the *Boston Globe*, and was also posted on the Department's website. In accordance with M.G.L. c. 30A, Department staff held one public hearing, remotely via the Zoom platform, on December 12, 2025, at which five public participants offered oral testimony.²

In total, fifteen (15) individuals, either on their own behalf or on behalf of their affiliated stakeholders, submitted written and/or oral comments on proposed regulation 610 CMR 16.00 during the public comment period.

For the most part, the comments received did not focus on the content of the draft regulation itself and did not identify *specific* recommended technical or substantive language edits. Rather, most comments offered broad support, opposition, and/or other observations related to potential, future innovation proposals (i.e., reduced-credit bachelor's degrees) that the BHE may receive and consider under the proposed regulatory framework.³ Other comments offered broad recommendations to either streamline (reduce) the proposed regulatory consumer protection provisions or, conversely, to expand (increase) such consumer protection provisions.⁴ Finally, another

explaining BHE's Degree Granting Authority in the context of reduced credit degree; and a subsequent "Update and Discussion on Innovation Pilot Proposals" at the Board's regularly scheduled meeting on June 17, 2025.

² Of the five participants who offered testimony at DHE's public hearing on December 12, 2025, four participants and/or their affiliated organizations submitted written public comment and largely read their written comments into the hearing record.

³ It is important to note (as reflected in Attachment B) that *any and all* applications for pilot proposals submitted to DHE staff pursuant to the proposed regulatory framework in 610 CMR 16 will be subject to the Board's consideration, evaluation, vote, and approval. While the Commissioner and Department staff will provide information and recommendations upon which Board members may act, the Board shall ultimately determine whether the risk of temporarily waiving or modifying its own standards or regulations to advance and evaluate a pilot program are outweighed by the proposed benefits. As such, the merits of any proposal advanced under the regulation (including, but not limited to, a sub-120 baccalaureate degree) will be considered by the Board at that future stage of the process

⁴ Regarding this category of comments, Attachment B includes specific responses to such recommendations for streamlining or expansion.

category of comments related to implementation matters which can be addressed through implementation policies or procedures.⁵

A summary of comments received, along with the Department's responses to the comments, is attached. See Attachment B, Public Comment Tracker (610 CMR 16.00).

Following careful review of all written and oral testimony, and following consultation with the Commissioner and Board Chair, DHE staff made technical edits to the document, including clarifying edits to Section 16.08(3) to better align with the Department's existing procedures related to external reviews conducted by third parties.⁶ Department staff have determined that no other amendments to the draft language of 610 CMR 16.00 are warranted at this time. Therefore, the final version of 610 CMR 16.00, attached hereto as Attachment A for the Board's review and approval, is materially unchanged⁷ from the proposed regulation 610 CMR 16.00 that DHE staff initially presented to the Board on October 28, 2025 (*BHE Motion 26-28*).

Staff Recommendation

Having undergone the required Chapter 30A process, the proposed, final regulation is attached as Attachment A. DHE staff recommends that the Board approve 610 CMR 16.00 as set forth in Attachment A for submission to the Secretary of the Commonwealth's Office for final promulgation in accordance with M.G.L. c. 30A.

⁵ Section 16.07 of the proposed regulations notes that the Department will be developing implementation policies and procedures, including a template for submission of letters of intent, which can provide context and guidance related to regulatory implementation expectations.

⁶ 2014 BHE Program Review Policy, AAC 14-35.

⁷ Please note that prior to publishing the regulation in the Massachusetts Register, the Secretary of State's Office also made minor, technical edits to meet their standard format and drafting conventions (e.g., paragraph numbering, abbreviations) which are also reflected in Attachment A.

610 CMR 16.00: Degree Granting Regulations for Pilot Proposals on Innovation

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16.01: Authority

610 CMR 16 is promulgated pursuant to the degree-granting authority of the Board of Higher Education under M.G.L. c. 69, § 30., and M.G.L. c. 15A, § 9(a) and (b).

16.02: Scope and Purpose

610 CMR 16 is promulgated for the purpose of helping to advance the effectiveness of higher education in the Commonwealth by responsibly enabling proposals for experimentation that are responsive to:

- (1) a documented need, such as labor market or student demand;
- (2) significant changes in society, demographics, technology, educational research; or
- (3) public expectations regarding postsecondary education.

610 CMR 16 establishes the framework for the Board to consider, advance, and evaluate pilot proposals from a public or independent institution of higher education subject to the jurisdiction of the Board seeking to offer a program or initiative that may be or appears to be inconsistent with one or more specific Board regulatory or policy requirement(s) related to degree-granting authority. The intent of 610 CMR 16 is to support innovative practices that are aligned with the institution's mission and strategic goals, broaden access to higher education, and lead to positive student outcomes, while ensuring accountability, transparency and quality.

610 CMR 16 allows for evidence-based evaluation before the enactment of broader regulatory or policy changes.

16:03: Definitions

As used in 610 CMR 16:

Accrediting Agency. A regional or national entity that grants formal recognition or acceptance of an institution or of programs or portions of the institution and is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education as a reliable authority concerning the quality of education or training offered by the institutions of higher education or higher education programs that entity accredits.

Board of Higher Education (Board). The Commonwealth's state higher education authority established pursuant to applicable provisions of M.G.L. c. 15A, § 4.

Commissioner of Higher Education (Commissioner). The chief executive and administrative officer of the Department of Higher Education and the Board of Higher Education, pursuant to M.G.L. c. 15A, § 6.

Degree. Any academic or honorary title or designation, such as, but not limited to, associate's, bachelor's, master's, certificate of advanced graduate study, or doctorate, awarded in recognition of college-level academic work.

Degree-Granting Authority. The authority to grant degrees, vested in institutions of higher education by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Department of Higher Education (Department). The Department of Higher Education, a state agency established pursuant to applicable provisions of M.G.L. c. 15A, § 6.

Eligible Institution: A Public Institution of Higher Education or an Independent Institution that meets the eligibility criteria set forth in Section 16.04.

Independent Institution. Any institution of higher education, other than institutions within the public system of higher education as set forth in M.G.L. c. 15A, § 5, that offers or seeks to offer courses for credit or courses leading to an academic degree in Massachusetts.

New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE). An accrediting agency recognized by the U. S. Secretary of Education.

Public Institution of Higher Education. A community college, state university, or an institution within the University of Massachusetts segment as defined in M.G.L. c. 15A, § 5.

Visiting Committee. A committee of competent individuals in relevant fields appointed by the Department to evaluate an institution and/or to evaluate particular programs within an institution.

16:04: Minimum Eligibility Criteria

To be eligible for consideration for approval of a pilot proposal under this regulation, an Independent Institution or a Public Institution of Higher Education must:

- (1) be accredited without sanction or public notation for a minimum of six consecutive years preceding the date of application by an accrediting agency that is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education;
- (2) be a Massachusetts-based institution that has maintained a physical presence in the Commonwealth for a minimum of six consecutive years preceding the date of application;
- (3) have been operated continuously by the same governing entity for a minimum of six consecutive years preceding the date of application; and
- (4) not be under any investigation or corrective action reasonably related to an academic program, academic quality and/or the sufficiency of financial resources by the Commonwealth, including the Massachusetts Attorney General and the Department, or the federal government.

If an Independent Institution or a Public Institution of Higher Education meets all of these criteria, it will be considered an Eligible Institution and the Department will accept and review a proposal consistent with the procedures and criteria set forth in 610 CMR 16.00.

16:05 Application

When an Eligible Institution wishes to offer a program or initiative that may be or appears to be inconsistent with one or more specific regulatory requirements or policy standards of the Board, and the proposed program or initiative does not currently fall within the scope of the institution's program approval authority, as approved by the Board, or within the scope of the institution's charter as enacted pursuant to any general or special law, the institution must submit to Department staff an application to advance a pilot proposal pursuant to 610 CMR 16.00. The proposal shall identify the specific Board regulation(s) or policy standard(s) that may be or appear to be inconsistent with the institution's proposed pilot program or initiative and shall demonstrate reasons why the Board should temporarily modify or waive such regulation(s) or standard(s) and advance the institution's proposal.

A complete application consists of:

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1. a complete Letter of Intent (see Section 16.07); and
2. the payment of any required fees.
 - a. An Independent Institution seeking approval for a pilot proposal under this regulation shall submit the appropriate fee amount as established in 610 CMR 2.06(1)(b)(1) and shall cover applicable Visiting Committee expenses as delineated in 610 CMR 2.06(1)(b)(2). All fees required under this policy shall be paid to the Board's Licensing Fee Trust Fund and shall be used solely for the purposes of the Licensing Fee Trust Fund.

Prior to submitting an application, an institution is strongly encouraged to consult with Department staff.

16.06: Review Criteria

In determining whether to approve an Eligible Institution's application to advance a pilot proposal, the Board, acting upon recommendations of the Commissioner and information provided by the Visiting Committee and/or Department staff, shall review the institution's proposal based on the following criteria:

1. *Innovation:* The institution is proposing an innovative pilot program that seeks to increase the effectiveness of higher education and the risks of temporarily waiving or modifying the Board's standard(s) or regulation(s) to advance and evaluate the pilot program are outweighed by the proposed benefits. Factors the Board shall take into consideration in making this determination include whether the proposal sufficiently:
 - a. demonstrates how it is intended to increase the effectiveness of higher education, based on validated research, similar pilots in operation elsewhere, or emergent market and/or industry best practices;
 - b. demonstrates that it is responsive to: a documented need, such as labor market or student demand; changes in society, demographics, technology, educational research; or public expectations regarding postsecondary education;
 - c. identifies goals and intended outcomes, including student and program or institutional outcomes, and includes proposed measures and metrics the Board and the institution will use to evaluate the success of the initiative, including the use of an external perspective; and
 - d. demonstrates that students will not be harmed and will receive equivalent benefit from the initiative by identifying potential limitations and/or risks to students, identifying mitigation strategies to address those limitations and/or risks, and ensuring informed consent.

2. *Quality and Consumer Protection:* The institution's proposal demonstrates the institution's overall ability to provide and sustain an appropriate learning environment for students and otherwise satisfies the Board's standards or regulations for degree-granting institutions of higher education. Factors the Board shall take into consideration in making this determination include whether:
 - a. the proposal is consistent with the institution's existing mission;
 - b. for Independent Institutions, the proposal otherwise satisfies the Board's standards, regulations, and implementation policies and procedures as required by M.G.L. c. 69, § 30, and 610 CMR 2.0, and for Public Institutions of Higher Education, the proposal otherwise satisfies the Board's standards, regulations, and implementation policies and procedures as required by M.G.L. c. 15A, § 9;
 - c. the institution demonstrates that it will exercise sufficient administrative and fiduciary control over the initiative, including academic programming;
 - d. the institution demonstrates that it has sufficient resources (e.g., financial, human, physical, and technological) to both initiate and sustain the initiative;
 - e. the proposal speaks to degree or certificate nomenclature, and intended student outcomes, as appropriate;
 - f. the proposal speaks to the integrity of the proposed initiative or degree program(s) (e.g., admissions and degree requirements) and requires students to accomplish a defined amount and quality of work, with graduates well prepared for continued study or performance in occupations related to the program of study; and
 - g. marketing of the initiative or degree program(s) will be clear and transparent with the institution publicly disclosing whether the pilot may limit a student's future eligibility for transfer opportunities, continued study, or employment and ensuring that all participating students have informed consent of the pilot nature of the initiative.

16.07: Letter of Intent

After following its own local process for program approval, an institution must submit to the Commissioner of Higher Education a complete Letter of Intent, which shall:

- (1) demonstrate the institution's eligibility under Section 16.04;

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(2) identify where the proposed initiative may be or appears to be inconsistent with one or more Board regulation(s) or a specific policy or policies, and otherwise confirm that the initiative is consistent with all other applicable Board regulations and policies; and

(3) address all review criteria in Section 16.06(1) and (2).

The required content and format of the Letter of Intent shall be determined by the Commissioner pursuant to Department policy and procedures, provided that at a minimum, the Letter of Intent shall:

(1) state the purpose and intent of the initiative and the intended innovation that it is intended to advance;

(2) provide converging evidence to support there is a problem to be solved through innovation;

(3) provide evidence to support efficacy of proposed innovation including, if applicable, an analysis of the experiences of other institutions that are offering or have offered a similar proposal;

(4) confirm and describe how the initiative is consistent with the institution's mission;

(5) describe how the initiative fulfills a demonstrated need and/or provides one or more defined benefits to existing or potential students;

(6) include an analysis of the proposal's alignment with academic and workforce needs;

(7) demonstrate the financial, human, physical, information, and technological resources required for the pilot and evidence that the institution has sufficient resources to begin and sustain the initiative;

(8) identify potential risks to students and present risk mitigation strategies to demonstrate that students participating in it will not be harmed and will receive at least equivalent benefit from participating as those not participating in the initiative;

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- (9) address degree or certificate nomenclature, as appropriate, ensuring that nomenclature is clear and not so similar to other degree or certificate programs so as to cause confusion to the identity of each;
- (10) provide proposed marketing materials which shall clearly and conspicuously include disclosures to students which, at a minimum, shall speak to the pilot nature of the program, and cost;
- (11) describe how the institution intends to secure the informed consent of students participating in the pilot program;
- (12) identify the intended student and/or program outcomes, and what measures and metrics the institution will use to evaluate the progress and success of the initiative provided that, at a minimum, success outcomes should include measures of persistence, graduation rates, total cost to students and subsequent employment and earnings outcomes;
- (13) include a description of formative and summative assessment plans that will be used to ensure continuing quality, relevance, and effectiveness of the initiative or program, as well as any required reporting to the institution's accreditor, licensure bodies, or other authorities; and
- (14) include any other pertinent information deemed relevant by the institution or requested by the Department.

The Department shall develop a template for the submission of Letters of Intent for Pilot Proposals, and shall issue implementation policies and procedures.

16.08: Review Procedures

1. *Department Response:* Within 30 business days of receiving an institution's Letter of Intent, the institution will receive written communication from the Department either confirming that the Letter of Intent is complete, and therefore will be advanced to the External Review process, or that additional information is needed and must be submitted within 30 business days.
2. *External Review:* Except as provided in Section 16.08(3), all pilot proposal applications will be subject to an external review by a Visiting Committee following the procedures

established in 610 CMR 2.06(2), as supplemented below and in Department implementation policies and procedures

- a. The Visiting Committee will be appointed by the Department consistent with the procedures set forth in 610 CMR 2.06(2)(a) through (e). The Visiting Committee's charge shall include reviewing the institution's application to assess compliance with the review criteria and expectations in 610 CMR 16.05 and 16.06.
- b. A physical site visit will not be required during an external review except when the proposed program or initiative does not lend itself to remote evaluation methods, such as:
 1. Programs or initiatives that require new physical facilities, laboratories, equipment, or instrumentation;
 2. Programs or initiatives that significantly depart from the institution's stated mission and objectives;
 3. When a report resulting from remote external review concludes that the program or initiative cannot be adequately assessed remotely; and/or
 4. An institution requests an on-site visit.
- c. The Visiting Committee shall study all materials submitted by the institution to Department staff; may meet with the institution; and shall assess the institution's compliance consistent with the review criteria and expectations set forth in 610 CMR 16.05 and 16.06 and consistent with its charge. The Visiting Committee shall submit a report, including recommendations, to Department staff. A copy of the Visiting Committee's final report shall be submitted to the institution, which shall respond in writing. If Department staff determines that the institutional response needs to be reviewed by the entire Visiting Committee or any of its members, the response will be forwarded to the evaluator(s) for further review.

3. *Acceptance of External Reviews Conducted by Impartial Third Parties:* In lieu of requiring an external review organized and conducted under Section 16.08(2), the Department may accept an external review process conducted by NECHE or another accrediting agency recognized by the U.S. Department of Education, if: (a) Department staff determine that the accrediting agency's standards and processes are appropriately aligned to the Board's standards and processes related to degree-granting authority. and (b) after such accrediting agency determines that an institution has the appropriate status to begin advertising the initiative, recruiting students, and accepting applications from existing or potential students.

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The Department reserves the right to request additional information necessary to determine whether the initiative meets the Board's standards. The institution shall notify the Department of any subsequent determination or approvals required by the accrediting agency to reach or maintain full accredited status for the initiative. The institution shall commit to the timely sharing with the Department of any and all communications, reports, or other information exchanged between the institution and its accreditor(s) and/or licensing authorities.

4. *Public Comment:* Upon the completion of the External Review process under Section 16.08(2) or (3), and Department staff determination that the application has reached a stage of readiness for final public comment before a recommendation is made to the Board, notice of the proposed initiative will be posted on the Department's and institution's website for a minimum of 21 calendar days prior to Board consideration for approval. At the end of the comment period, Department staff will review and take into consideration any and all comments received. The institution will also be asked to describe its efforts, where required, to solicit public comment and to provide supporting documentation that it has satisfied the Board's requirements as described above.
5. *Board Determination:* Upon the conclusion of the review of public comment and the process, the Commissioner will evaluate materials submitted by the institution, the written report(s) of the Visiting Committee, along with the response(s) of the institution, and will make a specific recommendation to the Board. The Board shall take action, by formal vote, to either approve or disapprove the request. The Board may consider the number, scale, and type of other approved pilots pursuing the same or similar initiative in determining whether to approve a new application.

16.09: Reporting Requirements

Annual Institution Reports: For at least the first five years of operation of the initiative, the institution shall submit to the Board annual status reports, providing narrative and statistical information on the institution's compliance with any applicable Board regulations and standards and with the goals and representations set forth in connection with the institution's proposal, including the institution's enrollment; finances; assessment of progress in meeting program and student outcomes, including student learning outcomes, as applicable; reports or other information regarding the initiative that may be required by an Accrediting Agency, licensing agency, or other authority; and other information as may be requested by Department staff.

16.10: Duration

1. *Conditional Approval:* Initial approval is limited to a maximum of five years and may be subject to conditions deemed necessary or appropriate by the Board. Institutions may request an extension by submitting a rationale for the extension and updated evaluation data on enrollment, student learning outcomes, and other information as requested by Department staff. The Board may extend or shorten the conditional approval time period based on an evaluation of the pilot under Section 16.10 which shall take into account sufficient time and data to assess the impact and success of the pilot.
2. *Revocation:* Nothing herein shall limit the Board's authority and responsibility pursuant to 610 CMR 2.10, or M.G.L. c. 15A, § 9(b) to initiate revocation or suspension action against an institution's degree granting authority to offer a pilot program if facts are brought to the attention of the Board suggesting a reasonable probability of the institution's non-compliance with applicable state law or regulation and/ or non-compliance with the institution's conditional approval.

16.11: Conclusion of Pilot

Based on an evaluation of the authorized pilot(s), the Board will either: grant full approval to the program(s) or initiative(s) by removing the pilot designation; extend conditional approval of the pilot(s) for another period of time; consider future regulatory or policy changes to codify and scale the pilot(s); or otherwise work with the institution to phase out the pilot(s) if unsuccessful.

Name/Affiliation	No.	Comments	DRAFT BHE Response	Column1
President Christopher Hopey/ Merrimack College	1	Suggests streamlining the “Letter of Intent” requirement in 16.07 by removing “excessive” front-loaded requirements-- including workforce studies, financial models, and marketing materials-- until DHE confirms innovation proposal’s viability	Comment is vague and overly broad; we do not agree that the stated requirements are “excessive” loaded requirements-- including workforce studies, and not necessary for consumer protection.	
President Christopher Hopey/ Merrimack College	2	Suggests elimination of “duplicative” Visiting Committee (VC) reviews (16.08(2)), stating that visiting committees are already used by NECHE and federal accreditors to ensure quality.	Section 16.08(3) addresses “duplicative” visiting committee reviews. Consistent with current policy and practice that section is intended to allow the DHE to accept an external review process conducted by a recognized accreditor, such as NECHE. The DHE is suggesting technical amendments to make that clearer.	
President Christopher Hopey, Merrimack College	3	Suggests establishment of clearer and more “measurable standards” (i.e., predictable criteria, defined timelines, and transparent expectations”) for proposal approval and renewal	The DHE believes the criteria are sufficiently measurable and predictable; the criteria were patterned off of current 610 CMR 2 approaches, and uses terminology also used by NECHE.	
President Christopher Hopey/ Merrimack College	4	Suggests removal of DHE’s reserved right to “arbitrarily” cap number of pilot program proposal submissions	Section 16.08(5) allows, but does not require, the BHE to cap the number of pilot proposals. DHE recommends maintaining this discretion as it preserves the “pilot” nature of the BHE’s approval approach and allows the BHE, in its discretion, to control the size and scope of the pilot (cohorts) to allow it to gather data and test assumptions before codifying an experiment on a large scale.	

President Christopher Hopey/ Merrimack College	Suggests addition of language “protecting the autonomy” of many private colleges and the UMass system, by clarifying that IHEs with existing statutory or charter-based autonomy remain “outside” BHE program-approval authority for three-year bachelor’s degree programs	The BHE is not seeking to exert jurisdiction over IHEs beyond that which is currently authorized under law or what is currently allowed in an institution’s legislative charter. Section 16.05 provides that the regulations apply only to those IHEs that are proposing a “program or initiative that does not currently fall within the scope of the institution’s program approval authority, as approved by the Board, or within the scope of the institution’s charter enacted pursuant to any general or special law.” The BHE has no authority to amend an institution’s charter.
President Christopher Hopey/ Merrimack College	Suggests automatically permitting an accredited institution “in good standing” to offer a 90-credit version of a NECHE-approved 120-credit degree	The Board considered this approach as an option before it moved forward with drafting the proposed regulation. DHE recommends staying the course and, consistent with the Board’s intention, piloting innovative proposals, such as a sub-120 credit degree, and gathering data before permanently codifying such a regulatory change.
President Christopher Hopey/ Merrimack College	States that although the regulations appear motivated by interest in “three-year” baccalaureate (BA) degrees, the draft ironically does not mention them at all.	610 CMR 16 is promulgated pursuant to the degree-granting authority of the Board. Though limited to inviting applications for a proposed innovation related to an institution’s degree-granting authority, the regulations are intentionally broad and do not limit the scope of a proposed innovation to reduced credit degrees. The purpose of this intentional approach is to encourage creative ideas and applications.

President Nicolle Cestero/American International College	8	<p>Suggests addition of a “process and timeline” for a pre-1943 IHE to seek and obtain a “prompt” advisory opinion from BHE regarding BHE’s claim of “jurisdiction” over the IHE and its pilot proposal submission.</p>	<p>Section 16.05 states that “prior to submitting an application, an institution is strongly encouraged to consult with Department staff.” Section 16.07 of the regulations further states that the Department will issue implementation policies and procedures. The Department will consider including a process and timeline for consults related to jurisdiction or an institution’s eligibility in implementation guidance.</p>
President Nicolle Cestero/American International College	9	<p>Suggests additional “defined” timeframes for BHE or DHE to issue approval or denial of institution’s application, above and beyond the 30-day window for confirming completeness under 16.08(1).</p>	<p>Section 610 CMR 16.08 cross-references the program approval review procedures, including the Visiting Committee (VC) review procedures, in the BHE’s degree-granting regulations (610 CMR 2.06(2)). Section 610 CMR 16.08 further states that such procedures can be supplemented in Department implementation policies and procedures. VC reviews are already held to specific timelines in the BHE’s degree-granting regulations; the Department agrees to reference such timelines with specificity in implementation policies and procedures, and confirms that such timelines must not exceed timelines currently articulated in 610 CMR 2.</p>

Vincent Pedone/State Universities Council of Presidents	10	<p>Expresses support for the Department's emphasis on consumer protection. Further suggests adding strengthened "consumer protection" related provisions – particularly targeting reduced credit undergraduate pilots – that require IHEs to provide students with clear, transparent, and standardized disclosures regarding: transferability within public higher education; eligibility for graduate or professional programs; recognition of credentials in the labor market; and potential differences in compensation or career advancement associated with "non-traditional" degrees</p>	<p>Section 16.06(2)(g) of the regulations requires that the marketing of the initiative must be "clear and transparent" with the institution "publicly disclosing whether the pilot may limit a student's future eligibility for transfer opportunities, continued study, or employment and ensuring that all participating students have informed consent of the pilot nature of the initiative." The Letter of Intent (LOI) section of the regulations (Section 16.07(1)-(14)) further includes several consumer protection related provisions (e.g., necessary disclosures, clarity of degree nomenclature; securing informed consent; identifying risks to students and potential risk mitigation strategies).</p>
Vincent Pedone/State Universities Council of Presidents	11	<p>Suggests inclusion of "price protection" requirements to prevent pilot programs from charging tuition rates "comparable to a traditional 120-credit bachelor's degree"</p>	<p>Section 16.07(10) of the regulations requires institutions to make express public disclosures which must, at a minimum, speak to cost. Section 16.10(1) of the regulations further allow the BHE to approve a program "subject to conditions deemed necessary or appropriate by the Board." Subject to the facts and circumstances set forth in a particular proposal, the Board may include a price protection condition in an institution's degree-granting approval.</p>

Vincent Pedone/State Universities Council of Presidents	12	<p>Expressed concern that innovation proposals could unintentionally undermine "equity" and become shorthand for "cheaper" programs that disproportionately serve historically underserved individuals by "limiting access to the full breadth of educational experiences, such as liberal arts coursework, undergraduate research, internships, or study-abroad opportunities that contribute to long-term economic and civic outcomes."</p> <p>Therefore, suggests that any pilot proposing reduced-credit credentials should be required to "clearly articulate" what is being omitted from a "traditional" curriculum and analyze the potential equity implications of those omissions.</p>	<p>Section 16.06(1)(d) includes specific eligibility criteria that require an institution to demonstrate that students "will not be harmed and will receive equivalent benefit from the initiative" by: identifying potential limitations and/or risks to students; identifying mitigation strategies to address those limitations and risks; and ensuring informed consent. Section 16.07(8) further speaks directly to this concern by requiring the institution to "identify potential risks to students, and present risk mitigation strategies to demonstrate that participating students will not be harmed and will receive at least equivalent benefit from participating as those not participating in the initiative."</p>
Vincent Pedone/State Universities Council of Presidents	13	<p>Expresses support for the Department's emphasis on consumer protection. Further suggests that pilot proposals should, at a minimum, include an externally produced market or workforce analysis, an analysis of alignment with academic and workforce needs, an assessment of overlap with existing public higher education offerings, evidence of experiential value for students/employers, and a review of comparable models implemented in other IHEs or states.</p>	<p>The regulations address the expressed concerns by requiring proposals to: provide "converging evidence to support there is a problem to be solved through innovation" (Section 16.07(5)); describe how the initiative fulfills a demonstrated need and/or provides one or more defined benefits to existing or potential students (Section 16.07(6)); include "an analysis of the proposal's alignment with academic and workforce needs" (Section 16.07(6)); and include a review of comparable models implemented by other IHEs in other states (Section 16.07(3)).</p>

Vincent Pedone/State Universities Council of Presidents	14	Suggests that clarity is needed to confirm that, absent explicit BHE action, pilot programs will "sunset" at the conclusion of the approved five-year period provided under 16.10.	Section 16.10 clearly states that initial approval is limited to a maximum of five years. If the Board does not extend the conditional approval time period, the institution's legal authority to issue degrees expires pursuant to its terms. The DHE does not believe that further clarification in the regulation is necessary or warranted, but will continue to make expiration dates clear in the regulations.
Vincent Pedone/State Universities Council of Presidents	15	Reiterates support for existing provisions of 610 CMR 16.00 that give BHE discretion to cap the number of concurrent pilot programs; protect against higher education mission creep; require predefined metrics and assessment protocols; demonstrate institutional financial health and stability; and set appropriate minimum graduation and post-graduation outcome thresholds.	Comment is already addressed in regulations (see, Section 16.08(5); Section 16.04(4); and Section 16.07(1-14)).
Vincent Pedone/State Universities Council of Presidents	16	Questions both the need for and the quality of sub-120 credit BA degrees programs. Strongly supports maintaining the 120 credit standard for the BA degree and remains opposed to labeling reduced-credit programs as BA programs.	Section 16.07(9) of the regulations speaks to nomenclature, requiring institutions to "ensure that nomenclature is clear and not so similar to other degree or certificate programs so as to cause confusion to the identity of each."
Vincent Pedone/State Universities Council of Presidents	17	Supports rigorous monitoring and annual reporting during the pilot phase and recommends establishing a joint advisory or working group to assist the Department in the monitoring process.	Section 16.09 of the regulations speaks to the Department's annual monitoring of approved programs. The Department will take the suggestion for convening an advisory or working group to assist in this process under advisement.
Vincent Pedone/State Universities Council of Presidents	18	Suggests that reduced credit pilots should be initially restricted to "adult learners with prior college credit."	The Department declines to adopt this age-based, enrollment restriction.

Vincent Pedone/State Universities Council of Presidents	19	Suggests that regulations should require IHEs submitting pilot proposals to demonstrate evidence of student success in select PMRS outcomes areas (i.e., timely completion of gateway courses, on-time accumulation, persistence after first year, six-year comprehensive student success via VFA model, IPEDS metrics)	Current regulations require institutions to identify outcomes (see Section 16.07). The regulations also require Visiting Committees (VCs) to look for evidence of assessment, student learning outcomes, etc. (see Section 16.06).
Rob McCarron/AICUM	20	Explicitly requests that BHE adopt a policy (whether separate from, or incorporated into, 610 CMR 16.00) that "allows accredited colleges and universities in Massachusetts to permanently offer sub-120 credit bachelor's degrees."	Please see Response to Comment #6. In addition, please note that the regulations currently speak to the process for the BHE to permanently codify a pilot after it runs its course and the BHE has the opportunity to evaluate. See options under Section 16.11 Conclusion of Pilot: "consider future regulatory or policy changes to codify and scale the pilot(s)"
Rob McCarron/AICUM	21	Suggests that DHE reconsiders draft regulations' emphasis on "gatekeeping" innovation proposals (i.e., they require IHEs to seek "permission" to deviate from existing policy) in favor of language expressing support for the creation and scaling of pilot programs	Introductory language in the regulations seeks to frame the underlying intent of the regulations as that of advancing an opportunity. Namely, Section 16.02 (Scope and Purpose) expressly states that the purpose of the regulations is to help "advance the effectiveness of higher education in the Commonwealth" by "responsibly enabling proposals for experimentation" that are responsive to a documented need (e.g., labor market, student demand); significant changes in society, demographics, technology or educational research; or public expectations.

Rob McCarron/AICUM	22	Suggests removal or paring down of Visiting Committee's "duplicative" oversight activities under 610 CMR 16.08(2) that are already conducted by NECHE or other regional accreditors.	Please see Responses to Comments ##2 and 9.
Rob McCarron/AICUM	23	Expresses concern that Visiting Committee (VC) members "are solely selected by DHE," particularly in light of VC's broad discretion to request additional materials or meetings and issue findings requiring formal institutional responses. Further states that VCs should be held to clearly outlined accountability standards and review/ response timelines.	Please see Response to Comment #9 , above. In addition, note that Section 16.08 of the regulations cross-reference the Visiting Committee (VC) procedures established in 16 CMR 2.0. Pursuant to 610 CMR 2.06(2) VC membership is selected "in consultation with the applicant institution." In addition, VC members are to be objective, impartial, and have a "disinterested professional commitment to the assignment of the evaluation as charged by the Board." See 610 CMR 2.06(2)(a)-(h). The Department's implementation procedures can further clarify, consistent with the intent of 610 CMR 16 and 610 CMR 2.0, the roles and responsibilities of, as well as timelines applicable to, VCs.
Rob McCarron/AICUM	24	Expresses concern about BHE's discretion under 16.08(5) to cap the number of similar or concurrent pilot proposals under consideration at a given time	Please see Response to Comment # 4.

Rob McCarron/AICUM	25	<p>Suggests "simplifying" the Letter of Intent (LOI) requirements and expresses general concern that the extensive LOI requirements will require much staff time, data work and legal/ accreditation effort before knowing if the Board is open to waiving the relevant regulation. Suggests that the "burdensome and time-consuming" approval process will deter smaller institutions from pursuing a reduced credit bachelor's degree</p>	<p>We do not agree that the approval process is unduly burdensome or open-ended (Please see Response to Comment #9). The draft regulations strike the appropriate balance between helping to advance untested, experimental ideas and consumer protection. Regarding whether the regulations will deter smaller institutions from pursuing a proposed innovation, we will monitor and evaluate implementation of the regulations as we move forward.</p>
Rob McCarron/AICUM	26	<p>Suggests that IHEs should not be subject to a "full approval process" in exchange for only "conditional approval" up to five years, after which BHE decides whether to extend or sunset the pilot</p>	<p>Conditional five-year approvals are commonly used under 610 CMR 2 for new institutions and/or unique programs. The use of conditional approvals under 610 CMR 16 related to an innovation, often unproven or not fully proven is a cautious and responsible approach, is in alignment with the pilot nature of the approval. The conditions are intended to help ensure success or otherwise protect students if the program fails or needs modification before full codification.</p>

Rob McCarron/AICUM	27	<p>Suggests that five-year “conditional” status under 16.10, if included in final regulations, does not contain specific, enforceable protections outlined for students “caught in a discontinued reduced-credit program”</p> <p>Section 16.10 of the regulations allow the BHE to impose any conditions “deemed necessary or appropriate” by the Board. With regard to a reduced-credit degree proposal, the Board is not prohibited from requiring a teach-out plan or other relevant conditions (e.g., a showing of transferability of credits) at the outset of the approval process. Section 16.11 of the regulations further specify the options of the Board upon the conclusion of a pilot and states that the Board will “work with the institution to phase out the pilot if unsuccessful.” Irrespective of whether the institution terminates the pilot or the Board does not elect to permanently codify the pilot, Department staff will require a teach-out plan pursuant to existing DHE policy and practice, and the DHE’s extensive experience in this area.</p>
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Robert Zemsky, et al./College-in-3-Exchange	28	Commenter didn't speak directly to the regulations. The comment is noted. and did not offer edits, but offered "strong endorsement" of BHE enabling IHEs to provide "high quality alternate pathways to a college degree and to serve the interests of students, families, employers, and taxpayers." Commenter "applauded" the Board's willingness to entertain 3-year (sub-120 credit) degrees to enable the Commonwealth's institutions of higher education to "provide a rigorously designed college experience at a lower cost to students and families." Noted that the proposed regulations specify that pilot programs submitted for review must meet the following criteria: (a) a documented need, such as labor market or student demand; (b) significant changes in society, demographics, technology, educational research; or (c) public expectations regarding postsecondary education. Further stated that sub-120 degrees meet those criteria and explained how.
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Thomas McClellan, President, Boston Chapter / Professional Staff Union	29	Commenter didn't speak directly to the regulations and did not offer edits but urged BHE to "halt" the innovative degree pilot concept and instead "affirm the Commonwealth's commitment to equitable and fully resourced public higher education and protecting academic standards that uphold Massachusetts as a national leader in public higher Education."	The general opposition expressed in the comment is noted. Further, please note that the Board is developing a regulation that seeks to enable it to play a more direct role in the approval of new and innovative degree programs, rather than relying exclusively on accreditors. This policy will be informed by the Board's commitment to equity and its responsibility to ensure access to high-quality postsecondary opportunities for all students. In evaluating proposed pilots, the Board will apply these guiding principles alongside its commitment to consumer protection when assessing and making approval determinations.
Thomas McClellan, President, Boston Chapter / Professional Staff Union	30	Commenter cites specific concerns related to sub-120 credit BA degree programs, such as limiting student opportunities for "meaningful intellectual development" in the liberal arts and sciences, narrowing civic and career preparation, and creating a "two-tiered system in which first-generation, working-class, and low-income students are steered into condensed programs restricting flexibility and future opportunity, while students with greater resources continue pursuing traditional four-year degrees."	Section 16.06(1)(d) includes specific eligibility criteria that require an institution to demonstrate that students "will not be harmed and will receive equivalent benefit from the initiative by identifying potential limitations and/or risks to students," mitigation strategies to address those limitations and risks, and ensuring informed consent. Section 16.07(8) further speaks directly to this concern by requiring the institution to "identify potential risks to students, and present risk mitigation strategies to demonstrate that participating students will not be harmed and will receive at least equivalent benefit from participating as those not participating in the initiative."

Peter Stokes, Managing Director/Huron Consulting Group	31	Submitted a general letter of support "commending" the Commonwealth for taking a "thoughtful approach to enabling responsible educational innovation." Stated that the regulation provides institutions a "clear and responsible pathway to respond to challenges and opportunities facing the Commonwealth" and noted that the framework "supports innovations that expand access and affordability."	The comment is noted.
Peter Stokes, Managing Director/Huron Consulting Group	32	Suggests incorporating into the regulations at least "one or more examples of the kinds of initiatives the Innovation Policy framework is intended to support," such as the three-year bachelor's degree	The Department notes the suggestion. Similar to NECHE's Innovation Policy approach, however, we prefer to leave the regulations broad and, by design, invite a broad array of imaginative ideas. Section 16.07 of the regulations state that the Department shall develop and issue implementation policies and procedures. As discussions advance and as the Board issues approvals, the Department will consider including in implementation policies and procedures specific examples of the kinds of initiatives supported by the regulations.
Peter Stokes, Managing Director/Huron Consulting Group	33	Encourages BHE to "avoid duplicative review processes and requirements" that are already set forth in NECHE's Policy, such those related to mission-alignment, adequate resourcing, student protections, external review, data-driven evaluation, and clear public disclosures, and otherwise refine the framework to simplify review and reduce redundancy.	Please see Response to Comment #2, above. The regulations allow the BHE to accept an external review conducted by an accreditor. In addition, please note that NECHE does not accredit all institutions under Board purview.

Max Page, President/MTA	34	<p>Did not speak directly to the content of the regulations and did not suggest any specific line edits, but expressed "strong opposition" to the BHE pilot proposal which would "open the door" to the creation of sub-120 credit bachelor's degrees. Offered broad critique of 3-year/reduced credit bachelor's programs</p>	<p>The purpose and intent of the proposed innovation regulation is to enable the Board to review and consider proposals from the field that promote innovative approaches to academic program delivery and enhance the overall student experience. This regulation is not limited to the review or approval of sub-120 credit baccalaureate programs. The Board and the Department will take the comments under advisement as they implement the regulations and review relevant applications.</p>
Max Page, President/MTA	35	<p>Expressed broad opposition to a 3 year/ reduced credit degree citing potential "disruption to the integrity of associate-level degrees and the Commonwealth's MassTransfer system;" potential creation of a two-tiered system of higher education in which first-generation, low income students would be disproportionately funneled into fast-track programs that limit their exposure to the liberal arts and humanities; and potentially limiting impacts on students who pursue graduate programs requiring specific prerequisites or state licensure.</p>	<p>The comment is noted and will be taken into consideration as the Board and the Department implement the regulations and review relevant applications. Please also see Response to Comment #12.</p>

Max Page, President/MTA	36	<p>Stated that the value of a degree from an institution must not be "limited to serving the needs of industry," and stated that a shortened bachelor's degree would strip away the flexibility that students need to discover their academic and professional pathways, noting that the 120 credit structure allows students to explore different fields, change majors, add minors and pursue second-language study. Stated that a limited-credit degree would make such exploration nearly impossible, and would limit students' intellectual development and career paths.</p>	<p>The comment is noted and will be taken into consideration as the Board and the Department implement the regulations and review relevant applications. Further, please note that while the innovation regulation creates a pathway for such proposals to be received, reviewed and considered by the Board, the regulation is not limited to the review or approval of sub-120 credit baccalaureate degrees. Potential risks and limitations such as the ones noted by the commenter must be addressed in an applicant's proposal and will be considered by the Board. The regulation is designed to support multiple sectors and segments of Massachusetts higher education institutions serving diverse student populations, including learners whose varied backgrounds, prior learning, work, and lived experience may benefit from flexible pathways that promote reengagement and credential attainment. When paired with the state's efforts to reconnect learners age 25 and older through financial aid programs, as well as initiatives to reengage students with some college but no degree, this regulation seeks to create new opportunities for individuals to return to and succeed in higher education.</p>
Max Page, President/MTA	37	<p>Broadly suggests that BHE foster "flexibility" by "using Fair Share funds to let all students graduate from college debt free"</p>	<p>The comment is beyond the scope of the innovation regulation content, and is noted.</p>

Mick Jones/BSU Faculty, Professor of Economics	38	Commenter did not speak directly to the regulations and did not offer specific edits. Expressed general support for a "90 credit bachelor's degree" but stated that it would "not solve the "workforce shortage issue." Offered comments on why we have a workforce shortage problem, noting, among other things, that the cost of living in the Commonwealth is too high, wages are too low, and municipal leadership and infrastructure is inadequate.	The comment is noted and will be taken into consideration as the Board and the Department implement the regulations and review relevant applications. The Department further notes that issues such as the one noted in the comment (e.g., workforce shortage) should be addressed in an applicant's proposal for Board review.
Joanna Gonsalves/MSCA	39	Commenter did not speak directly to the regulations and did not offer edits but urged BHE to "halt" the innovative degree pilot concept and instead "affirm the Commonwealth's commitment to equitable and fully resourced public higher education and protecting academic standards."	The comment is noted. Please also see Response to Comment #29.
Joanna Gonsalves/MSCA	40	Commenter cites specific concerns related to sub-120 BA degree programs, such as limiting student opportunities for "meaningful intellectual development" in the liberal arts and sciences, narrowing civic and career preparation, and creating a "two-tiered system in which first-generation, working-class, and low-income students are steered into condensed programs restricting flexibility and future opportunity..."	The comment is noted and will be taken into consideration as the Board and the Department implement the regulations and review relevant applications. Please also see Response to Comment # 12.

President Mary-Beth Cooper/Springfield College	41	<p>Commenter did not speak directly to the regulations and did not offer edits, but wrote to express "vigorous support" for 610 CMR 16, and generally expressed support for reduced credit bachelor's programs by 1) describing the rationale and current landscape for reduced credit degrees, 2) addressing how MA may benefit from the judicious piloting of reduced-credit degrees, and 3) responding to potential areas of public concern over reduced-credit degrees</p>	<p>The comment is noted and will be taken into consideration as the Board and the Department implement the regulations and review relevant applications.</p>
President Mary-Beth Cooper/Springfield College	42	<p>Expressed broad support for the features of NECHE's Innovation Policy and noted that most of the NECHE guidance is mirrored in 610 CMR 16. Highlighted that 610 CMR 16 is "appropriately concerned" with mission alignment, responsiveness to student and regional needs, student experience, sufficient institutional resources and financial stability, transparency in marketing, and ensuring that students can move into a traditional 120-credit, four-year pathway should they choose.</p>	<p>The comment is noted and will be taken into consideration as the Board and the Department implement the regulations and review relevant applications.</p>

Claudine Barnes, President / MCCC (**offered verbal comment at public hearing only)	43	<p>Commenter did not speak directly to the content of the regulations and did not offer edits, but generally expressed concerns about the potential impacts that reduced credit degree programs may have on the Community College segment and its students. Described reduced credit degrees as "tricky" for community colleges- while commenter acknowledged the merits of shortening time to degree, she expressed concern that basic academic skills will be taken for granted and notes the potential impacts on programs such as MassTransfer.</p>	<p>The comment is noted and will be taken into consideration as the Board and the Department implement the regulations and review relevant applications. Further, please see Responses to Comments # 12, 29, and 36.</p>
Kelly Socia / Massachusetts Society of Professors – UMass Lowell	44	<p>Commenter did not speak directly to the regulations and did not offer edits but urged BHE to "halt" the innovative degree pilot concept and instead "affirm the Commonwealth's commitment to equitable and fully resourced public higher education and protecting academic standards."</p>	<p>The comment is noted and will be taken into consideration as the Board and the Department implement the regulations and review relevant applications. Further, please see Responses to Comments # 12, 29, and 36.</p>
Kelly Socia / Massachusetts Society of Professors – UMass Lowell	45	<p>Commenter cites specific concerns related to sub- 120 bachelor's degree programs, such as limiting student opportunities for "meaningful intellectual development" in the liberal arts and sciences, narrowing civic and career preparation, and creating a "two-tiered system in which first-generation, working-class, and low-income students are steered into condensed programs restricting flexibility and future opportunity..."</p>	<p>The comment is noted and will be taken into consideration as the Board and the Department implement the regulations and review relevant applications. Please also see Response to Comment #12.</p>

Representative Tram T. Nguyen/MA State Rep, 18th Essex District	46	Commenter did not speak directly to the regulations and did not offer edits, but expressed concern that “elements of the proposed regulations could unintentionally discourage institutions from pursuing innovation.” Suggests the regulations as drafted will put MA at risk of falling behind other states with more “flexible” models.	The comment is noted and will be taken into consideration as the Board and the Department implement the regulations and review relevant applications. Please also see Responses to Comments ## 2, 9, and 23.
Commenter 41	1	Comment 41	Response 41
Commenter 42	1	Comment 42	Response 42
Commenter 43	1	Comment 43	Response 43
Commenter 44	1	Comment 44	Response 44
Commenter 45	1	Comment 45	Response 45
Commenter 46	1	Comment 46	Response 46
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