

Working Draft

Commission on Higher Education Quality and Affordability (CHEQA)

*Final Report: Executive Summary and
Recommendations*

June 20, 2025

Executive Summary

The Massachusetts Fiscal Year 2025 budget tasked the State Board of Higher Education with convening a Commission on Higher Education Quality and Affordability (hereinafter referred to as either the “Commission” or “CHEQA”). As per Section 215 of that budget, a 21-member group of higher education, business, civil rights, and other stakeholders was charged with reviewing, evaluating, and making recommendations on:

- State higher education assistance programs and funding, including, but not limited to, aid for tuition, fees, books, supplies and other costs of attendance ... to ensure the accessibility and affordability of higher education institutions and to achieve best outcomes;
- Student costs and debts during and after attending said universities;
- Programs that improve student success, including, but not limited to, academic support, career counselling, assistance with applying for state and federal benefits and improvements to facilities;
- Improvements needed to increase the recruitment and retention of qualified adjunct and full-time faculty and staff; and
- Financial assistance program design and models to efficiently increase state assistance, improve outcomes and reduce student costs

Commission members include:

- Chris Gabrieli, Board of Higher Education Chair & Commission Co-Chair
- Veronica Conforme, Board of Higher Education Member & Commission Co-Chair
- Viviana Abreu-Hernandez, Executive Director, Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center
- Claudine Barnes, Faculty Member, Cape Cod Community College
- Joseph Bonilla, Student Government President, Westfield State University
- JD Chesloff, Executive Director, Massachusetts Business Roundtable
- Senator Jo Comerford, Co-Chair, Joint Committee on Higher Education
- Doug Howgate, Executive Director, Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation
- Ed Lambert, Executive Director, Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education
- Nate Mackinnon, Executive Director, Massachusetts Association of Community Colleges
- Mary Jo Marion, Associate Vice President, Worcester State University
- President Marty Meehan, University of Massachusetts
- Niki Nguyen, Board of Higher Education Member & Student, University of Massachusetts at Boston

- President Nancy Niemi, Framingham State University
- Commissioner Noe Ortega, Massachusetts Department of Higher Education
- Max Page, President, Massachusetts Teachers Association
- Representative Kelly Pease, Ranking Minority Member, Joint Committee on Higher Education
- President David Podell, Massachusetts Bay Community College
- Representative Dave Rogers, Co-Chair, Joint Committee on Higher Education
- Femi Stoltz, Director of Policy, uAspire
- Secretary of Education Patrick Tutwiler, Commonwealth of Massachusetts

The Commission divided its work into three key areas – student success, financial aid, and higher education human resources (Appendix, page 1). Ernst & Young LLP (EY-Parthenon) was engaged to conduct research and assessment in each of these areas. The Commission invited Massachusetts-based and national experts to present perspectives and experiences in each and held four public meetings on the topics. All associated materials, including meeting minutes, presentations, and recordings were made and remain available on the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education website at: <https://www.mass.edu/strategic/cheqa.asp>

The Commission largely aligned on the following key recommendations:

- 1. The Commonwealth should commit to dedicating a fixed, meaningful share of annual Fair Share Education and Transportation proceeds to support a range of higher education uses.** This would be consistent with other recommendations to reserve set shares of those funds (e.g. 50% for transportation) and would provide a consistent base of funding to support and advance key affordability and quality initiatives in higher education.
- 2. To complement the significant expansion in college access recently implemented through growth in Massachusetts state financial aid for higher education, the Commonwealth should invest further, first and foremost, toward implementation of evidence-based student success programs.** Investments in student success programs have been shown to significantly raise student persistence and graduation rates, especially for students least well served historically and currently, including low-income and first-generation college goers.
- 3. The Commonwealth should codify its financial aid commitment to students, families and institutions of higher education in a manner that establishes clear, consistent multi-year support on which they can rely.** Consistent with the MassEducate and MassReconnect commitment to free community college in the Commonwealth, a long-term commitment to affordability for students across the system should be not only

codified but prioritized. This could best be accomplished in the form of a defined benefits “promise program” alongside other streamlined student aid programs that express simply and clearly the financial support upon which students and families can rely.

4. **The Commonwealth should continue to expand financial aid for students in two primary directions: first, to support the basic need expenses (e.g. housing, food, child care, and mental as well as physical health care) of low-income students, thereby enabling them to take full advantage of tuition and fee-free college access opportunities; and second, to reduce on a sliding scale the burdensome debt that low- and moderate-income families must take on to meet their full cost of attendance.** Options to meet these goals were laid out for review, including one that pursues both directions at once.
5. **Because recruiting and retaining high-quality staff and faculty is a critical enabler for a high-quality higher education system, the Commonwealth needs to pursue a comprehensive review of faculty and staff remunerative and non-remunerative structures, policies, and practices including in the context of the high cost of living in various Massachusetts regions as compared to competitor areas.** The Commission’s preliminary research suggests significant gaps between compensation levels and cost of living measures and particular challenges with faculty and staff recruitment, especially in certain fields and with regard to entry-level compensation.

Ranges of Opinions on the Commission

In the interest of representing both the broad consensus (as above) and the range of perspectives on some key issues, the section below lays out some key areas of variation among members on these top issues. A range of opinions was present among Commission members on each of the main areas studied, including overall budgeting, student success initiatives, financial aid, and faculty and staff recruitment and retention.

Opinions on reserving a specific share of the Fair Share fund ranged from many who embraced a specific recommendation of 25% for higher education, to some who felt that even 25% was too low a share and should be at most a minimum, to others who supported a fixed share but did not feel we should recommend a specific figure. Opinions include, for example, the view that higher education should receive, at minimum, “a proportionate share” of Education and Transportation Fund total revenue. The share of the Fair Share funds allocated to higher education have declined from inception. Within the last year, however, as part of its FY25 budget recommendations, the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education recommended a 25% minimum share.

Support for expanding success programs was broad-based and strong. Some members expressed the view that further investments in the Commonwealth’s college success programs should more closely replicate the City University of New York (CUNY) Accelerated Study in Associate

Program (ASAP) which has gold standard, randomized trial evidence showing high impact and has been successfully replicated in multiple locations. Others argued for expanding funding for the existing Massachusetts SUCCESS program design that provides public institutions of higher education greater flexibility in operation and includes fewer required elements. While a majority of members agreed that success programs are the most critical element to improve higher education quality and affordability, some felt that faculty and staff compensation should be a top priority for the Commonwealth and argued that investments there also contribute to student success. Other Commission members stressed the importance of including transfer rates as a measure of institution of higher education success, noting that the ASAP program in New York prioritizes finishing an associate's rather than a bachelor's degree. Some members warned that structured pathways might limit student exploration and the breadth of their educational experience with concerns that pathways can restrict students from understanding broader career possibilities. Suggestions included tying SUCCESS funding directly to hiring case management workers to advise students in general and help students access additional state social service benefits in particular. Members argued that project-based learning and apprenticeships are necessary aspects of student success. One member emphasized that mental health is an essential aspect of student success.

With respect to financial aid, some members argued that state financial aid should be increased over time sufficient to guarantee all students a debt-free public higher education. Members advocated that UMass receive similar aid as other segments, so as not be penalized because of the institutional aid it currently provides to students as part of financial aid packages. The important role of independent institutions of higher education in the Commonwealth and need to extend financial aid to low-income students at under resourced non-profit institutions was likewise highlighted. While support for codification was broad, others noted that streamlining and simplification of financial aid programs are crucial aspects to providing stability and predictability for students and institutions. Some Commission members emphasized the importance of Early College programs as a form of financial aid, noting that participating students currently do not receive support from Massachusetts state financial aid programs. They also highlighted that there is a lack of financial aid for skill-based/non-degree credential/certificate programs. Concerns were noted that focusing on the neediest students might overshadow the needs of middle-income students. Cost estimates were prepared for several major recommendations, including a debt-free guarantee in meeting total cost of attendance expenses (i.e. expenses beyond tuition and fees).

Finally, strong opinions were registered on the matter of faculty and staff compensation, including that they should be broadly heightened to reflect the elevated cost of living experienced in Massachusetts. Members noted that SUNY and CUNY pay two- and four-year faculty the same salary, based on qualifications, and questioned why Massachusetts cannot adopt a similar model. They highlighted that in Massachusetts there is a difference in salaries between

those at community colleges and four-year institutions. Despite similar instructional responsibilities, community college faculty face higher workloads and lower pay, making it difficult to hire and retain qualified faculty. Some members advocated for “thriving” wages, as opposed to a “livable” wage, that would allow faculty to save for retirement and live comfortably after dedicating their careers to education. Members raised work environment factors, such as the number of classes taught, weekly preparation requirements, student-to-faculty ratios, and availability of classroom resources such as labs, materials, and library services significantly impact faculty satisfaction. They emphasized the importance of considering these comprehensive factors to create a supportive and sustainable work environment for faculty across both two- and four-year institutions. Others, however, felt that the analyses were insufficient to reach clear conclusions and that discussions on wages and conditions should be confined to the collective bargaining process. Several members noted that solutions could be more efficiently focused on the fields where recruitment is most challenging and asked whether structural patterns need to also be addressed.