MASSTRANSFER STEERING COMMITTEE

Meeting: Friday, October 10, 2025
10 a.m.
via Zoom

The first meeting of the MassTransfer Steering Committee was held on Friday, October 3, 2025 at 10:00AM via Zoom.

The Following Committee Members were present:
Claudine Barnes
Oren Cohen
Monique Lopez
Barry Maloney
Susan Martin
Midori Morikawa
Trinh Nguyen
Cristian Orellana
Darlene Rodowicz
Patrick Sullivan
George Timmons
Nef Walker

The following members were unable to attend:
Reyes Coll-Tellechea
Joanna Gonsalves

The following representatives from the DHE presented:
Noe Ortega, Commissioner
Rick Riccardi, Deputy Commissioner for Academic Affairs and Student Success and Chair of the Committee
Chris Grimaldi, Assistant General Counsel
Mario Delci, Associate Commission for Research and Planning
Art Esposito, Director for Academic Affairs and Student Success

I. CALL TO ORDER

Deputy Commissioner Riccardi called the meeting to order at 10:00 AM, secured acknowledgement that, according to Open Meeting Law, the meeting would be recorded. Noting no objection, the recording commenced. Deputy Commissioner Riccardi then introduced Commissioner Ortega for opening remarks.

II. COMMISSIONER'S REMARKS

Commissioner Ortega began by welcoming all participants and expressing appreciation for their time and expertise in supporting the enhancement of transfer opportunities across Massachusetts. He acknowledged that the creation of this committee had been long in development and emphasized gratitude for the collective commitment of its members.

The Commissioner explained that the primary purpose of today's meeting was to provide context and establish direction for the committee's future work. He highlighted the importance of transfer pathways in terms of advancing equity goals and improving student access and completion rates across the Commonwealth's higher education system.

He noted that, alongside the administration's efforts to reduce financial barriers, the committee would play a role in addressing procedural challenges to facilitate smoother student transfers. Commissioner Ortega referenced key initiatives such as direct admissions, joint admissions, and financial aid investments as tools for expanding access and streamline student progression. He also mentioned the importance of considering the "stackability" of credentials and upcoming federal policy discussions regarding short-term Pell Grants.

The Commissioner also expressed gratitude to Governor Healey and the administration for their continued investment in higher education affordability. He noted positive enrollment trends at public campuses in Massachusetts, due in large part to tuition-free opportunities for Pell-eligible students and enrollees across all Massachusetts Community Colleges. He reaffirmed the Board of Higher Education's commitment to its equity goal and reiterated that the committee's work would align with the Board's own four strategic priorities:

- Student Success and Affordability – particularly through financial aid.
- Economic Mobility – supporting upward mobility for students.
- Public Good Outcomes – recognizing education's societal value beyond individual benefits.
- Innovation – fostering creative solutions for student pathways and success.

Commissioner Ortega concluded his remarks by thanking members for representing their constituencies and for their shared dedication to these priorities. He then turned the meeting over to Deputy Commissioner Riccardi to begin introductions and lead the next portion of the session.

III. INTRODUCTIONS

Deputy Commissioner Riccardi asked the Committee Members in attendance to introduce themselves and speak briefly on their credentials.

IV. OPEN MEETING LAW

Following committee member introductions, DHE Assistant General Counsel Chris Grimaldi advised the Committee on the requirements of Open Meeting Law and the Committee's responsibilities pertaining to them.

Assistant General Counsel Grimaldi explained that the MassTransfer Steering Committee had been established by the legislature through the FY2025 budget and, as a public body created by statute to advise the Department of Higher Education, it clearly fell under the requirements of the Open Meeting Law. Because of this designation, the committee had certain obligations to meet under the statute. He outlined the two main components of the Open Meeting Law: public access and recordkeeping and noted that most meetings of public bodies had to be open to the public except for specific cases related to litigation or quasi-judicial functions. He clarified that while the public could attend meetings, participation or speaking are at the discretion of the chair, though the Attorney General's Office encouraged public engagement when feasible.

Assistant General Counsel Grimaldi went on to discuss procedural requirements, including the need to post public notice of each meeting, including the meeting's date, time, location, and general discussion topics, at least 48 hours in advance. He explained that meeting minutes had to summarize discussions substantively, not merely record that a topic had been discussed.

Moving to substantive requirements, Associate General Counsel Grimaldi described a meeting as any deliberation by a public body within its jurisdiction, explaining that "deliberation" referred to any form of communication—oral, written, or electronic—between members on matters under the committee's purview. To determine whether communication qualified as a meeting under Open Meeting Law, the Attorney General's Office recommended considering whether it was between members of a public body, involved a matter within the body's jurisdiction, constituted deliberation, and fell under any exceptions. He advised members to assume that Open Meeting Law applied whenever the group met or discussed committee-related business, even informally. He cautioned members to be aware that group emails or written exchanges about committee matters could qualify as deliberation, even if no one replied and noting that serial communications, when taken together, could form a quorum and therefore fall under Open Meeting Law, though such cases were uncommon. Ministerial communications—such as scheduling or logistical updates—were generally exempt.

Assistant General Counsel Grimaldi emphasized that the Attorney General's Office took enforcement of the Open Meeting Law seriously, maintaining a bureau dedicated to its

oversight. That office investigated complaints and could impose measures such as mandatory training, nullification of committee actions, civil penalties, or the release of public records.

He concluded by assuring members that he and the DHE legal team were available to answer any questions or assist with compliance issues. He stated that they would continue to work closely with Art Esposito, Director of Academic Policy and Student Success, and the MassTransfer Steering Committee to ensure compliance with the Open Meeting Law and avoid potential issues. Assistant General Counsel Grimaldi then invited questions and thanked the group once again for the opportunity to speak.

V. DESIGNATION OF CHAIR

Deputy Commissioner Riccardi noted that the Legislature requires a vote of the Committee to establish a Chair.

Commissioner Ortega recommended that, for this first year of the Committee and for the sake of "level-setting," it would be advisable for Deputy Commissioner Riccardi—the DHE's Chief Academic Officer—to serve in the role of Committee Chair. The Commissioner continued by pointing out that the Committee was established in perpetuity and that reassessment, year over year, to define the most effective governance structure would be an appropriate way to proceed.

Member Rodowicz made the motion to elect Deputy Commissioner Riccardi as chair and to establish yearly reassessment.

Member Cohen seconded the motion.

The motion passed by unanimous consent.

VI. CHARGE TO THE COMMITTEE

Chair Riccardi reported that he and Director Esposito had developed a draft charge, which he planned to distribute to the group with the rest of the meeting's materials. He provided background information, noting that Section 9 of the Committee's enabling legislation empowered BHE to develop and implement a transfer compact to facilitate student transfers between public institutions without the loss of academic credit or standing.

He explained that in June 2008, BHE accepted the final report from the Commonwealth Transfer Advisory Group, which introduced a new statewide transfer policy called MassTransfer. Since that time, DHE's MassTransfer policy and related programs had evolved to support vertical transfer within Massachusetts' public higher education system.

Chair Riccardi stated that the committee's charge was to serve in a consulting capacity to help the department assess and advance the MassTransfer initiative by incorporating input from students, campus leaders, transfer staff, and external business community members. The committee's main role was to advise DHE on improving students' ability to transfer degrees and course credits within the Commonwealth.

He outlined three specific responsibilities for the committee:

1. To convene and collaborate with campus partners to assess the effectiveness and implementation of MassTransfer policies.
2. To recommend revisions, amendments, or the development of new MassTransfer policies and procedures.
3. To advise the department on creating a common course numbering system for lower-division courses across the state system, as required by legislation.

VII. ORDERS OF BUSINESS

Chair Riccardi identified two orders of business: establishing the duration of commitment for each member and establishing a meeting schedule. The Committee unanimously consented to a Member's initial term being two academic years, allowing for seating replacement members in the event of a current Member's enrollment status or professional affiliation changes. It was further agreed upon by unanimous consent that the Committee would strive to establish a cadence of two Committee meetings per semester so that Committee Members may collaborate with campus-based partners and affinity groups during the intervening months to better develop Committee recommendations or guidance.

VIII. MASSTRANSFER OVERVIEW

Director Esposito presented an overview of the current implementation guidelines and execution of the 6 components of MassTransfer Programming:

- The MassTransfer Course Equivalency Database
- The General Education Foundation/STEM GenEd Foundation
- Associate-to-Bachelor's (A2B) transfer pathways
- The Commonwealth Commitment
- Reverse Transfer
- The MassTransfer Tuition Waiver/Credit

During this portion of the meeting, Director Esposito pointed out potential areas of growth and improvement for the existing components of MassTransfer, highlighting three points of inquiry on which the Committee might deliberate.

- Addressing the question of post-transfer bachelor's degree completion
- Expanding the number of transfer pathways students can access on MassTransfer Webpages
- Providing guidance on practical execution of a Common Course Numbering system for lower-division courses taught in the System

In response to a couple of follow-up questions from the Committee, Chair Riccardi suggested that effective communication strategies and consideration of dual enrollment be addressed at future Committee meetings.

IX. MASSTRANSFER DATA

Mario Delci, Associate Commission for Research and Planning, presented an overview of the current state of community college transfer outcomes and how such data can inform the Committee's future work.

In his initial comments, Associate Commissioner Delci pointed out that nationwide data show a staggering 80% of community college students enroll with the intent to transfer, noting that local and national data also show that the number of students who successfully transfer is nowhere near that percentage. He also demonstrated the importance of increasing the number of students who do transfer and how vital it is that we help more of them complete bachelor's degrees, citing that 61% of high-demand, high-value occupations require a bachelor's degree as the entry-level academic credential required.

Associate Commissioner Delci pointed out that, despite some fluctuation year-over-year, data shows that transfer rates have remained relatively stable in the last decade. He also noted that the data show a richly diverse student population in the Commonwealth, but also that there are significant equity gaps in terms of completing vertical transfer and in degree attainment.

Associate Commissioner Delci also shared that Post Transfer retention after transfer (students returning for a second year) is about 78–80%, rebounding after a dip during the pandemic and that bachelor's degree completion after transfer has risen from 55% to about 62–63% over the past decade. He also pointed out that the data show 65% of associate-degree holders earn a bachelor's within four years of transfer, compared to 53% without one.

X. QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION

Chair Riccardi opened the discussion to questions or comments.

Member Nguyen commented, first expressing thanks for the invitation to serve on the Committee, then noting the importance, from the perspective of an external partner, of learning where gaps are and then investing from a programmatic angle to identify opportunities to create partnerships of stakeholders. She continued by suggesting an ecosystem of support to identify the services necessary for students to successfully transfer and complete a bachelor's degree, then making the necessary investments to get them there.

Chair Riccardi answered a question from the meeting chat pertaining to the process flow for MassTransfer. He noted the challenge of managing a centralized database that relies on individual input from each campus. Indicating that a longer conversation was necessary for this topic, he ensured that it would be taken up in future meetings.

Member Sullivan asked a question about the impact that tuition-free access to community college is having on the demographics of that Segment's enrollment.

Member Timmons indicated that 40% of the students who have taken advantage of MassEducate at his institution (Holyoke Community College) are over the age of 25. He stated that these students are working parents, oftentimes working two jobs, enrolled as part-time students, and their need for wraparound support is significant. He closed by noting the importance of including this sort of support in our conversation and not solely focusing on the efficiency of credit transfer.

Member Barnes concurred with President Timmons, noting that a similar trend is evident at Cape Cod Community College. She indicated that many students are returning to college and shifting careers, making their needs slightly different than have been traditionally seen at the community college level. She also mentioned college preparedness and that many students require additional support and may need to take developmental, non-credit-bearing, coursework, lengthening their time to degree completion.

Member Sullivan followed up on his original question, wondering whether we would see a demographic shift in the next three years as more people become aware of (tuition-free) options.

President Timmons responded with information that they have gleaned from an environmental scan of Western Massachusetts: the fastest population growth is over the age of 60 and that the 18- to 22-year-old population is shrinking. He shared his opinion that the student population will be predominantly older students in the coming years.

Chair Riccardi noted the challenge that higher education will face as the "non-traditional student becomes the traditional." He strongly stated that we need to adjust how we support students through degree completion. Noting that, while the strides we have

made in terms of supporting students' affordable access to college are significant, a student with no debt but also no degree is not a success story.

Member Walker added to the Chair's suggestion that non-traditional students are now the traditional students, encouraging the Committee to embrace the shift in language and the understanding that students' needs will also shift. She suggested it is worth investigating how prepared our institutions are to support an older student population. She also introduced the topic of cognitive fatigue to the conversation. Noting that we already know a lot of these students are working more than one job and have families to support, she highlighted the importance of centering on the student experience in this process and centering on how to decrease the cognitive load by making it easier for them to choose their best pathway to a degree.

At Chair Riccardi's invitation, Director Esposito commented on the importance of academic advising when considering the comments that the Members just made. Framing the varied challenges identified by each of the previous Members' comments as elements of "Time Poverty," he pointed to the historic effectiveness of proactive and holistic academic advising when it is employed to situate a student's educational opportunities within the experience of the rest of their lives. Director Esposito emphasized the critical role of informed, proactive, and empathetic academic advisors in helping students—especially those facing "time poverty"—navigate the challenges of higher education. He argued that advising shouldn't remove academic requirements but should provide professional support to help students meet them without diminishing the learning experience.

Member Lopez asked if our definition of success would also be shifting in light of the acknowledged shift in demographic. Noting that there is acceptance of the time-deficit faced by student parents and students who work, should it not also be accepted that it will take these students longer to graduate.

Member Rodowicz shared a college/career partnership program that pays working students a full-time salary for eight to 16 hours of work during semesters that they are enrolled when the student makes a commitment to the position for three years after degree completion. Noting that this sort of partnership is expensive, she also shared positive outcomes for business partners that equaled those the student experiences.

XI. ADJOURNMENT

Chair Riccardi asked for any additional questions or comments. Receiving none, he adjourned the Committee.