

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

NO.: BHE 22-15

Executive Committee Date: October 15, 2021

BOARD DATE: October 22, 2021

COMMISSIONER'S FY2021 AND FY2022 SALARY ADJUSTMENTS

MOVED: The Board of Higher Education hereby approves a salary increase, along with a one-time 1.5% payment, for the Commissioner in full alignment and consistent with the amounts and timeframes as authorized by Administration and Finance for Department staff for FY21 and FY22 and as specified in the attached background statement.

VOTED: Motion approved and advanced to the full BHE by the Executive Committee on 10/15/2021; and adopted by the BHE on 10/19/2021.

Authority: Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 15A, Section 6; BHE 19-01

Contact: Constantia T. Papanikolaou, Chief Legal Counsel

Background

Pursuant to its enabling legislation, the Board of Higher Education (BHE) is authorized to determine the Commissioner's salary, subject to appropriation. M.G.L. c. 15A, § 6.

During its June 22, 2021 meeting, the Board of Higher Education (BHE) approved the Commissioner's FY2020 Performance Evaluation, as prepared by members of the Executive Committee. See BHE 21-48. Based on the timing of the BHE's June 2021 evaluation, substantial elements related to the Commissioner's FY21 performance were included in that review. A vote on a salary adjustment for the Commissioner was deferred to allow the BHE an opportunity to gather additional information on the fiscal outlook for FY22, and to receive Executive Office for Administration and Finance (ANF) guidance on allowable salary increases for Department staff and public higher education non-unit professionals.

ANF subsequently issued guidance on allowable salary increases for Department staff and public higher education non-unit professionals. Such guidance provides as follows:

- FY21 Increase: Effective July 5, 2020, eligible managers will receive a 2.5% across the board increase, including retroactive pay.
- FY22 Increase: Effective July 4, 2021, eligible managers will receive a 2% across the board increase, including retroactive pay.
- One-time Payment: Eligible managers will receive a one-time payment equivalent to 1.5% of their salary (minimum of \$1,000). This one-time payment will be calculated after the FY21 and FY22 increases for eligible managers.

Following the BHE's June 2021 approval of the Commissioner's evaluation, the Executive Committee met twice, on September 8th and October 15th respectively. The Executive Committee reviewed the ANF guidance within the context of the Commissioner's June 2021 evaluation, as well as the materials the Commissioner presented to the full BHE during his June 22, 2021 (FY2021) end-of-year report, the BHE's August 23rd special meeting, and the BHE's September 22nd retreat. The Executive Committee further noted the rich discussion and engagement among Board members during the BHE's August and September meetings, as the Board reviewed and provided feedback to the Commissioner on FY21 accomplishments and set priorities for FY22.

Having completed an assessment of the Commissioner's performance to date, the Board Chair, in consultation with the Executive Committee, is recommending a salary increase, along with a one-time 1.5% payment, for the Commissioner in full alignment and consistent with the ANF recommendations set forth above.

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

NO.: BHE 21-48

BOARD DATE: June 22, 2021

COMMISSIONER'S FY2020 PERFORMANCE EVALUATION

MOVED: The Board of Higher Education hereby approves the attached Commissioner's FY 2020 Performance Evaluation, as prepared by members of the Executive Committee.

VOTED: Motion adopted by BHE 6/22/2021.

Authority: Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 15A, Section 6

Contact: Constantia T. Papanikolaou, Chief Legal Counsel

Background

The Executive Committee met twice, on April 12th and June 3rd to discuss and review the Commissioner's performance during the 2019-2020 academic year (FY2020). Attached is the Committee's recommended FY20 Performance Evaluation of the Commissioner, as submitted for Board of Higher Education (BHE) approval.

The Executive Committee notes that the Executive Office for Administration and Finance (ANF) has not issued guidance yet on potential FY20 cost of living increases for Department staff and public higher education non-unit professionals. The Executive Committee has decided to wait for such ANF guidance before recommending a salary adjustment for the Commissioner's FY20 performance.

Attachments

04a_ Commissioner's FY20 Self Evaluation

04b_ Executive Committee's FY20 Performance Evaluation of the Commissioner

Information and Summary for Commissioner's Evaluation
July 1, 2019 – June 30, 2020 (FY20)

Introduction: The Pandemic Impacts Higher Education

FY20 (July 1, 2019) began in quite an unremarkable fashion. At the time, we were moving our new and ongoing initiatives forward and hopeful that the Commonwealth's favorable financial position would allow for increased investment in public higher education. We were also preparing an expansive budget request for approval by the BHE. The proposed FY21 budget is more comprehensive than those in years past. The Equity Agenda had gotten traction, and significant funding was coming to support it. But, approximately three-quarters into the FY20 fiscal year, everything was turned upside down.

The last four months of FY20 and the first three months of FY21 brought changes that have upended higher education, public and private, in totally unexpected ways. I would have been labeled insane or deluded if, at the beginning of FY20, I would have stated that our governmental agency would be working remotely. The same would apply if we suspended typical conferences, meetings, and convenings and that higher education institutions would be immediately transitioning to remote learning. The Commonwealth's revenues plummeted as businesses closed for an extended period. We could only guess what the 'New Normal' might look like, but it became clear early that higher education would be fundamentally altered.

In my previous year's (FY19) evaluation document, I focused on the Department's evolving relationship with the public higher education institutions and summarized several ongoing and new departmental initiatives. The BHE had approved an expansive higher education budget, and we promoted significant initiatives such as the Performance Measurement Review System (PMRS), the Equity-based Strategic Framework (Equity Agenda), and the Financial Review and Risk Monitoring of Independent Institutions (FARM). Ongoing efforts such as Early College, Transforming Developmental Education, the New Public Program Approval Process, Financial Aid Redesign, and the State Authorization Reciprocity Agreement (SARA) were expanded and taken to higher levels. Likewise, campus-specific initiatives such as:

- 100 Males to College
- Basic Needs Security; Housing Pilot for Homeless and Housing-Insecure Students
- Civic Learning and Civil Discourse on Campus
- Competency-based Education
- MassTeach
- MassTransfer
- Massachusetts Inclusive Concurrent Enrollment Initiative (MAICEI)
- Open Educational Resources
- Student Learning Outcomes Assessment

continued to evolve and grow—evidence of consistent progress in achieving systemwide goals.

Transitioning to Remote Operations and the COVID-19 Response

It is a credit to the departmental Staff that the projects listed above continued to move forward in the face of transitioning departmental operations to a remote environment. In mid-March 2020, our Department vacated One Ashburton Place and 11 Beacon Street in Boston as ordered as well as 75 Pleasant Street, Malden (Office of Financial Student Assistance). We immediately resumed operations from remote locations, and we did so in short order.

Among the first things that we did was ensure that Staff had the appropriate equipment and connectivity to carry out their functions effectively. Laptops and phones were distributed to those without access to this equipment. Essential files and materials transitioned to secure shared spaces such as those used by Microsoft Teams, and connections to Virtual Private Networks (VPN) were established. We have enabled multiple accounts to conduct virtual meetings with Zoom and have held a series of all staff meetings (60 plus participants). Our Division of Administrative Affairs has been working with EOE's technology group to ensure a smooth transition. Regularly scheduled meetings, such as all-staff, senior Staff, and individual Staff, were held as if nothing had changed. Meetings with stakeholders such as the BHE, campus presidents, and others moved to a different modality but did not fundamentally alter our work. It is noteworthy that the remote BHE meetings lead to a dramatic increase in the number of individuals that listened to the deliberations compared to the previous face to face meetings.

In July 2019, the Department launched the iComm (internal communications) Project. The goal was to conduct an agency-wide needs assessment and to convene a working group that would develop a set of recommendations to improve our overall internal communications at the DHE. This foresight allowed us to be well-positioned when office locations were closed in March 2020. In response to the new challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, we repurposed the iComm group to focus on a rapid transition to a 100% remote working environment. The resulting environment represents a significant shift in how the Department and the State work, but will ultimately make us more resilient and flexible as an agency.

The iComm group has since achieved two significant accomplishments. The first accomplishment entailed migrating files from DHE's shared local servers to a cloud-based platform, SharePoint. This change allowed our Staff to access files remotely without using VPN and enabled greater collaboration on documents across departments.

The second accomplishment established a centralized intranet using Microsoft Teams. It provided a virtual space for conversation, sharing high-level announcements from myself, EOE HR, and IT, and making general agency policies, procedures, tools, and resources more accessible for Staff. The iComm group worked to train Staff on the new technology quickly. It will continue to help transition staff to this new environment, roll out additional tools and resources as needed, and promote information sharing and collaboration.

While the Department of Higher Education is not sure how long it will continue to work remotely, likely, any return to normalcy will not occur before Spring 2021. A state government working group has been tasked with making recommendations on the future of Telework in

Massachusetts. Given our transition's success, it is likely that we will be one of the last agencies to be asked to return to work from our previous location. We are prepared and well situated to respond to whatever eventuality we are likely to face. Just as this crisis provides an opportunity to reimagine our teaching and learning processes, it can serve as a time to revisit how the state government conducts its business.

The DHE has worked with all of our public higher education institutions, the Executive Office of Education and the Department of Public Health, to plan for the current academic year's opening. We review individual campus plans and participate in daily meetings with colleagues from across the state have set the stage for an effective and safe opening of our institutions in whatever teaching and learning modality they might adopt. I have personally been involved in bi-weekly conference calls with the Secretary of Education and a representative of the MA Department of Public Health to answer private and public institutions' questions regarding COVID-19 planning. The great majority of the problems that arose required technical solutions and were ably fielded by the Department of Public Health representative. These questions and concerns involved cleaning procedures, testing and tracing, quarantining students, and the like. All of these discussions helped inform institutions as they worked through detailed opening plans. Public university presidents shared their plans with the DHE over the last few months.

Department staff remain vigilant in implementing and enforcing the BHE's existing coordinating, governing, regulatory and funding authority, consistent within the general broader statewide work underway and the sector-specific higher education requirements and recommended protocols. By way of example, Department staff are:

- actively engaged with campus administrators to help troubleshoot issues related to campus dedensification and subsequent repopulating/ reopening plans;
- conducting labor relations meetings with union representatives for staff and faculty members of AFSCME, APA, MCCC, and MSCA;
- incorporating COVID-19 cost and revenue impact analyses in ongoing financial risk assessments of independent higher education institutions;
- monitoring public higher education institutional budgeting and cost management planning (e.g., furloughs);
- requiring that the impact of COVID-19 be reflected in strategic plans and pending letter of intent/program proposals, on the BHE's behalf;
- mediating student and other consumer complaints related to campus COVID-19 prevention and response plans;
- monitoring changes to federal financial aid regulations, and its implications for state policy; and
- addressing the impact of COVID-19 related to the administration of state financial aid on campus, including access to resources for students.

All of the planning that occurred in the March-June 2020 timeframe resulted in decisions that led the community colleges to provide their students with remote, online, teaching, and learning opportunities. The state universities, as institutions with residential facilities, faced more challenging decisions. In effect, they reduced students, faculty, and Staff's density on their institutional footprint but did not go to strictly remote learning. They instituted a mixed approach

with many online courses but also some face to face instruction. Residence halls did accept some students with capacity limited to between 30 and 50 percent. Early indicators suggest that these strategies have been, by and large, successful, although the monitoring of COVID-19 cases is crucial to avoid subsequent outbreaks. The current situation is fluid as virus outbreaks will likely occur as campus density rises over time. More widespread testing and effective tracing will be necessary to tamp down new outbreaks thoroughly.

The Equity Agenda

The Equity Agenda has continued to move forward over the past year despite the extraneous circumstances we find ourselves in. In many respects, we have doubled down on our work during the pandemic as it disrupted the teaching and learning environment. The institutions we lead, serve, and rely on have supported the Equity Agenda and championed it. College and university presidents have, by voice and deed, been leaders in this effort. Sustaining this vital Project's enthusiasm will be an essential component of the FY21 focus in the face of inevitable financial challenges.

The efforts during FY20 to advance the Equity Agenda have positioned the BHE/DHE well to sustain and enhance the work to date. The work has not gone unnoticed beyond Massachusetts. Several staff members and I have been invited to symposia, conferences, and webinars to discuss our approach, findings, and plans to address racial inequity in our public higher education system. Presentations to the National Governor's Association, Excelencia in Education, and the Education Writer's Association, among others, have served to highlight Massachusetts' work in the field of equity in higher education. Continuous conversations and responses to inquiries from HCM Strategists also provide evidence of significant interest in Massachusetts's Equity Agenda approach. These efforts culminated in the recent official announcement that the Lumina Foundation has selected Massachusetts to be the fifth Talent, Innovation, and Equity (TIE) state. The formal launch of the partnership with the Lumina Foundation allows us to join Oregon, Colorado, Tennessee, and Virginia as TIE states. This designation has placed the BHE/DHE at the forefront of efforts to reduce equity gaps nationally and address the systemic racism that has impacted higher education for so many decades.

In last year's evaluation report to the BHE, I spoke of the critical elements that had to be in place for the Equity Agenda to get traction and have an opportunity to be sustained. At the time, I focused on the following conditions:

- First, we have begun to develop clear messaging to describe our objectives and lay out the rationale for our primary focus on race and geography.
- Second, we will continue to engage the leadership on the campuses, including local boards, to clarify the direction we are moving towards.
- Third, it was essential to begin to explain our focus to critical members of the Legislature.
- Fourth, we began to set the stage for conversations with foundations that could be willing to support our efforts financially.
- And lastly, if the initiative was to have broad support and staying power in Massachusetts, we determined it would be crucial to make a case for the

Equity Agenda to the broader community, particularly the business community.

I believe that all five conditions have been addressed in FY20 and now provide a solid foundation for moving this initiative to a higher level. We intend to continue to beat the drum by reinforcing our message to internal and external stakeholders during this next phase of the Equity Agenda. But we cannot be complacent in these efforts as the attention can quickly be drawn in other directions as other concerns, such as public institutions' financial stability, become more crucial given the impact of COVID-19.

In FY21, we anticipate the ongoing implementation of the equity work through consistent and compelling messaging between the DHE and the public higher education institutions in Massachusetts, members of the BHE, and Staff of DHE. The IComm Project has facilitated these discussions within the DHE, but we need to ensure that outreach to other constituencies is significant. Communication is particularly important as we look to launch our policy audit exercise over the coming months. It will also be critical for us to communicate effectively with those institutions that have received initial Lumina Foundation grants to ensure that we meet our funding agency's responsibilities.

Financial Assessment and Risk Management (FARM)

FY20 marked the launch of the steps necessary to successfully implement the Financial Assessment and Risk Management (FARM) Process. The planning process turned out to be quite a time-consuming and complicated task requiring significant staff involvement.

The sudden closure of Mount Ida College in April 2018 and the lack of forewarning to students and parents precipitated the efforts to ensure that this circumstance did not occur again. Legislative and Governor's actions followed in November 2019, and the remainder of FY20 was dedicated to preparing for the implementation of 610 CMR 13.00. Many critical steps were achieved in FY20, including:

- Drafting and negotiating amendments to legislation (Chapter 113 of the Acts of 2019);
- Drafting and passing new FARM regulations (610 CMR 13.00);
- Convening meetings in the statehouse and with other stakeholders to provide legal support on the conversations;
- Preparing BHE motions and presenting to the BHE;
- Drafting, negotiating, and implementing the MOU with the regional accreditor, the New England Commission on Higher Education (NECHE);
- Drafting and implementing the new FARM policies and procedures as Fiscal, Academic Affairs, and Legal Affairs work together to roll out this vital work (FY20); and
- Initiating and conducting preliminary screenings in the Spring of 2020.

This work has laid a solid foundation for full implementation in FY21.

The Department and its Staff have become adept at interacting with independent higher education institutions in the Commonwealth. I believe that our role has become quite important in guiding the timing of decisions regarding closure, consolidation, or merger of private institutions.

It is noteworthy that all of the work involved in successfully launching the Financial Assessment and Risk Management work is entirely new to the agency. It is appropriate to commend the Staff for this work's excellence and the professionalism of their interactions with the private colleges in the private colleges and universities in Massachusetts.

An essential partner in this effort is the New England Commission on Higher Education (NECHE). They review the ongoing financial status of higher education institutions that they oversee in the Commonwealth. They are responsible for a transparent and effective closure process should it become necessary. At the same time, I believe how the Mount Ida College closure occurred indicated flaws in this institution's oversight. The accreditor's inaction resulted in legislative intervention and, ultimately, greater oversight by the Department of Higher Education. Nonetheless, NECHE plays an essential role in gathering information on member colleges and universities' institutional finances.

Considerable effort has gone into developing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the New England Commission on Higher Education (NECHE) and the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education. The MOU's primary purpose is to help exchange relevant information between the Commission and the Department. Our goal is to be more proactive with the prospect of an institutional closure than our current posture, which is reactive. Although the MOU was finalized in FY20, full adherence to its terms required continual conversation between the commissioner and the president of NECHE. These conversations were successful, and information sharing has already begun before the end of the FY 20 period. We anticipate a continued positive relationship between DHE and NECHE.

Another significant development was the establishment of an Advisory Committee to provide expertise as the Department reviews the financial status of independent institutions. Three experienced and highly qualified independent experts were selected to serve on the Advisory Committee. They have been briefed on the Department's process for reviewing the financial status of independent institutions. While they have not been called upon in FY20, we anticipate their work to begin in FY21.

From my perspective, the singular most crucial development in FY20 has been setting the stage for the subsequent passage of all the elements of a broad and comprehensive addition to the Board's regulatory authority over private higher education institutions in the Commonwealth. The Financial Assessment and Risk Management (FARM) project focused on private higher education institutions' financial viability in Massachusetts. It arose as an attempt to ensure that institutions at risk of imminent closure do not harm students. I highlight this work since the task was wide-ranging. It required legislation and extensive discussion with stakeholders, necessitating BHE and constituent endorsement and full implementation. No small feat.

With the passage of the new regulatory legislation in the fall of FY20, Staff from a variety of DHE divisions—legal, administrative affairs, and academic affairs—have been continuously engaged in this work. Implementation of the FARM process is the most substantive and far-reaching changes that I have seen in Massachusetts' regulatory environment during my tenure at the Department of Higher Education.

Empirically-Based Policy-Making

One of the most critical developments in the Spring of 2019 was the launch of the Performance Measurement Review System (PMRS). While the PMRS is statutorily required, it was reconstituted as a public-facing, web-based platform with new and expanded metrics. In FY20, the DHE, working with other agencies, including the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), the Executive Office of Education (EOE), and the Executive Office of Technology Services and Security (EOTTS), established a collaborative process to highlight DHE's integrated Digital Data Systems projects. Additional efforts were also made to garner resources to expand and enhance the DHE Data Systems in innovative ways.

A vital component of this effort was to engage our stakeholders in promoting empirically based approaches to policy work and ensure wide dissemination and use of data provided by DHE. The adoption of Tableau was a significant effort in this direction. Public higher education institutions began using this data presentation software within the administrative structures of their institutions. Subsequently, this approach was adopted by local boards of trustees. While PMRS enhanced our data collection efforts, Tableau allowed users to visualize and organize presentations to describe data analysis's nuances and subtleties better. There remains considerable work that needs to be completed to expand the data collection efforts of HEIRS. The purpose of these efforts is to capture better the realities facing higher education in Massachusetts, evaluate the effectiveness of academic policies and procedures, and determine appropriate paths for dealing with an uncertain future.

In last year's evaluation report, I stated the following:

It is a foregone conclusion that clear and consistent performance indicators need to be part of any robust accountability system. In the Massachusetts context, where a decentralized environment prevails, it can be difficult to come to consensus on goals, policies, and efforts to gauge progress without a common underlying data system.

I went on to state that “FY19 is a turning point in our ability to both measure progress and to sustain that progress into the future” and “The more analytical approach that is manifested in the PMRS will serve us well in this regard.” The advances of FY20 in the area of data collection, enhancements, analytics, and data visualizations confirm that the foundation created in FY19 has served us well in FY20 and we are primed for additional improvements in FY21 and beyond.

These efforts' primary goal to enhance data collection supporting a more empirically-based policy approach has been to tie an individual's trajectory from early childhood education to elementary and secondary education to higher education and into the labor market. To

accomplish this, state agencies have banded together to create a statewide longitudinal data system (SLDS). Efforts to develop SLDS involve the Department of Early Education and Care (EEC), the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), and the Department of Higher Education (DHE). The Executive Office of Education (EOE) and the Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development have also been at the forefront of this effort to create the State Longitudinal Data System (SLDS).

There remains much work to be completed to build the SLDS fully. The challenge is much more than simply tying together existing data sets. It requires a fuller understanding and conceptualization of the student's transitions from one stage of life to another. On the higher education front, I acknowledge that our data systems are not sufficiently complete or robust to successfully engage in this effort without additional personnel and technology investment. While the past underinvestments in HEIRS are a liability, I am confident that we are moving in the right direction with the necessary foresight to plan and execute effectively.

Final Thoughts

Over the last two years, the Department of Higher Education has been tasked with new and far-reaching projects. These projects came to light due to a series of challenges faced by higher education in Massachusetts, both public and private. While it was necessary to pivot to address these challenges, the ongoing and essential projects that preceded the previous two years moved forward. Significant advancements continue to be made in the area of program approvals, remediation, dual enrollment, transfer, state reciprocity agreements, Stem Starter Academy programming, support for veterans, financial aid disbursement, teacher diversity, strategic planning, and learning outcomes assessment.

I would characterize FY20 as foundational in many respects. Without an appreciable increase in Staff, the DHE has accepted critical new projects that significantly impact higher education in the Commonwealth. Their commitment to the success of students is unparalleled. They managed to keep ongoing projects moving forward and, without exception, they have welcomed new projects and challenges.

My only disappointment over the last few years is that the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education's reputation and expertise is more recognized nationally than within the Commonwealth. Our approach to equity in higher education is unique, and we are acknowledged as a leader among our peers in this area. As a statewide organization, SHEEO itself has adopted an approach modeled after Massachusetts. I can make similar laudatory comments about the oversight of independent institutions. Our impact has been such that our regional accreditor, NECHE, has applied the MA metrics to all New England states. While those metrics were developed in collaboration with NECHE, the implementation process we advanced is rather novel from a national perspective.

I credit the expertise and commitment of the DHE staff in bringing about these positive results.



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Carlos E. Santiago
Commissioner
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Board Chairman

MEMORANDUM

TO: Board of Higher Education Members

FROM: Executive Committee

DATE: June 3, 2021

SUBJECT: Commissioner's FY2020 Performance Evaluation

The Executive Committee met on April 12th and June 3rd to review the Commissioner's performance during the academic year 2019-2020 (FY2020). As a framework for this discussion, Committee members were guided by the "Information and Summary for Commissioner's Evaluation FY20" that was presented by the Commissioner to the Executive Committee and shared with the Board. The Commissioner also did provide some oral update of subsequent activity in FY21.

Given the extraordinary circumstances of the past year and the reconstitution of Board activities post the pandemic interruption, this review is six months behind the normal schedule largely due to the absence of an active Executive Committee during calendar 2020.

With that as background, Committee members engaged in a constructive exchange of views and perspectives on departmental activities and accomplishments made by the DHE under the Commissioner's leadership over the last eighteen months, including his fifth full year in this office. The Committee members also considered the context of challenges and opportunities facing higher education.

Overview

The Academic Years 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 are, of course, dominated by the COVID19 pandemic and all that had to be done by college campuses and by the DHE to cope with this unprecedented challenge. But before the pandemic struck and increasingly recently as well, the major work to address long-term, critical challenges facing Massachusetts public higher education have also been progressing.

With regard to the pandemic, the Commissioner's self-review rightly reminds us of the extraordinary challenges unleashed upon higher education, the DHE and everyone last March as COVID19 spread. For the DHE itself, the review provides a flavor of the many practical tasks and human needs that had to be addressed to allow the Department to operate effectively in a remote mode. The Commissioner and the whole DHE team are surely to be thanked and commended for doing what was needed to pull off this transition and then continue to meet the duties of the DHE.

And those duties suddenly expanded and changed as the DHE worked to bridge the flow of questions, concerns, information, decisions and resources between state government and our campuses, each of which had to rapidly respond to shift their educational offerings online and to meet the needs of students and staff.

All told, it must be noted and appreciated that the Commissioner, the DHE and our campuses and educators admirably scrambled first to support remote operations, then to complete the academic year 2019-2020 and then to plan for and better deliver the blend of offerings for the academic year 2020-2021. None of this was, of course, in anyone's plans and all of this needed to be accomplished urgently and gracefully. Even as one can point to largely inevitable gaps and losses, the overall picture is clearly one of adept adaptation.

We note with gratitude that the Commissioner and DHE did make important strides in AY 19-20 and into the current AY 20-21 on long-term strategic issues as well, even as pandemic response took center stage so often. DHE worked with partners across government and in the independent sector to support passage of a landmark bill to provide for proactive monitoring of the fiscal health of private colleges and began its implementation. The Equity Agenda took shape and gained significant resources and momentum throughout the period due to the leadership and actions of the Commissioner and the DHE team. And a variety of ongoing initiatives and necessary functions were advanced.

The past 18 months have also marked an important change in the perspective of the members of the Board of Higher Education. Following significant turnover in membership as terms ended and new members were appointed and then after a total hiatus on committee meetings and reduced range for regular BHE meetings during the initial phases of the pandemic, the Board went through a period of reflection working with the Chair and Commissioner. The result is a refreshed commitment to higher levels of engagement by the BHE with the most critical strategic issues facing higher education in Massachusetts. This will demand more from the Commissioner and the senior staff at DHE but should also help energize a broader base of support for the important work ahead as current initiatives blossom and as the higher education field goes through expected challenges and changes.

We thank the Commissioner for his flexible leadership and for his clear voice and vision at the helm. His experience and judgment have been crucial across both our needs to react to challenges and our desire to help foster strategically necessary change and innovation. We also commend him for his consistent willingness and ability to work effectively and collaboratively with the many higher ed stakeholders from campus leaders to the Board, to the growing ecosystem of engaged civic entities, and to the many branches of government with whom coordination is essential, especially in the pandemic.

Looking Ahead

We think AY 21-22 will be a crucial year of opportunity and challenge as recovery and re-opening unfold, federal and state resources are leveraged and the key initiatives underway progress. The BHE depends on the Commissioner to engage us as partners in the work, broaden the constituencies involved and together to forge the sort of progress we all believe necessary.

In our FY19 review, we called on the Commissioner to make clear the vehicles and tactics that the DHE, BHE and our allies and partners could rely upon to foster necessary strategic change for higher education in Massachusetts. By now, it is entirely clear that the Equity Agenda is the primary vehicle for that effort and considerable effort has been successfully deployed by you and your DHE team to advance that including garnering helpful private resources (e.g. the Lumina TIE grant) to support it.

The BHE desires a clearer understanding of the key assumptions and plans under that Equity Agenda. We suggest that a summer/fall 2021 retreat be devoted to the topic and the Executive Committee stands ready to partner on designing the agenda. The specific assumptions and plans to pursue the Equity Agenda will be crucial to the shape and impact of our collective strategic commitment to the goals and will be essential for success. The Board is eager to understand the current plans and to be a partner in developing them further as well as to be as active as possible in helping make them happen.

The fiscal health of the higher education system remains concerning once the federal stimulus funds are absorbed and the long-term demographic trends kick in fully by the mid-2020s. The FARM work is crucial to ensuring student protection against fiscal declines at private institutions and as your self-review points out this work is unprecedented in scope and challenge. The Board is eager, within the bounds of confidentiality of course, to support the needed refinement of our department's work to ensure no more institutions announce closures inside the 18-month window enshrined in the law and regulations. And the expansion of monitoring to include public campuses is an important complement to be achieved in AY 21-22.

Finally, the Board looks forward to continuing the fundamental refreshing of the role and processes of the Board's engagement in both the strategic and more routine procedural work. Different eras require different processes. We understand your stated frustration that the work of the DHE is better known and recognized outside of Massachusetts and would advise that more deeply engaging the Board and working together to broaden the ecosystem of committed stakeholders across the Commonwealth in the strategic evolution and flourishing of our higher education systems will both increase our chances and scale of success and broaden our in-state visibility and allies.