

State Universities BHE Segmental Report – May 3, 2021

Good Morning, Chairman Gabrieli, Secretary Peyser, Commissioner Santiago and members of the Board of Higher Education. On behalf of the State Universities Council of Presidents, thank you for this opportunity to provide you with an update on the Massachusetts State University System.

I am pleased to share with you that the state university presidents have selected John Keenan, President of Salem State University, to chair the Council of Presidents next year, so this will be my last report as chair. I want to thank you, Commissioner Santiago, Secretary Peyser, the Department of Higher Education, and my colleague David Podel for our work together through what has certainly been an unprecedented challenge in my career.

For my final report, I would like to take a few minutes to share some updates on the state budget and to offer some thoughts about the challenges, changes, and continued optimism in our state university system.

State Budget

As you know, last week, the House concluded their FY23 budget deliberations. I am very happy to report that the House of Representative improved state universities line item funding levels from recommendations made by the Governor in January. The House modestly raised campus line item appropriations, amortized incremental salary increase obligations included in our collective bargaining agreements, and included the FY22 state university funding formula in our campus line item appropriations. The House also included funding for the state universities internship incentive program as well as recapitalizing the public higher education endowment incentive program. We are pleased that the House accepted the Governor's recommendations for increases in the MassGrant Plus program and expansion of the early college initiative.

While my colleagues and I are grateful for this recognition – as well as the inclusion of funding in the most recent supplemental budget for the retroactive salary increase payments – it must be acknowledged that the funding level for these contracts is derived through a “state supported share” methodology used to determine funding levels for our labor contracts. This funding methodology covers only about 40% of the actual costs associated with the increases in our collective bargaining agreements.

The remainder of the salary increases, and the employee fringe benefit costs for those unfunded salary increases, are covered by the institutions. As you all know, the single greatest cost-driver on our campuses is covering the unfunded portion of our collective bargaining agreements. We want to thank this board and your department for your advocacy to maximize state support for costs associated with our collective bargaining agreements.

There is one other item I'd like to highlight from the House budget that my colleagues and I wholeheartedly support. The House established the "Tomorrow's Educators Program" to incentivize our students to enter the teaching profession and teach in our public schools. Since this has historically been an area of focus for our state universities- many of us began as teachers' colleges- we are pleased that the House prioritized funding for this new scholarship program in their budget. Our state universities welcome the opportunity to educate these aspiring teachers on our campuses and this program will be a priority for our advocacy efforts in the Senate. At MCLA, we have been working with our local legislative delegation, local k-12 districts, and the Berkshire chapter of the NAACP to develop a diverse education workforce pipeline- these funds will ensure the work's lasting impact and legacy.

My colleagues and I would like to thank the Board and the Department for your advocacy on our behalf. We would also like to express our sincere thanks to the Massachusetts House of Representatives for their continued support of our state university system. We will now turn our advocacy efforts to the Senate with the hope of building upon the progress we made in the House last week.

Farewell

Over the last 2 years that I served as chair, the COVID-19 pandemic created significant challenges for our campuses as we were forced to transition from a largely on-campus and in-person academic community to remote instruction and then work to safely bring students back to campus. I am proud that our campuses were leaders in the fight against the spread of COVID. Our state universities were some of the first higher education campuses in the country to require students to be vaccinated in order to return to in-person learning. We attribute our successful return to campus life to all the COVID mitigation policies we implemented including mandatory COVID vaccinations and boosters, mask wearing policies, social distancing, advanced cleaning, and isolation and quarantine protocols. All these policies and practices combined led to over 90% of our campus communities being fully vaccinated and positivity rates far lower than the state average.

As the Commonwealth and our universities emerge from the worst global pandemic in more than a century, we are all trying to assess the long-term effects the COVID-19 pandemic will have on our communities. Aside from our collective work to ensure our campuses safely return to pre-pandemic operations, we are also facing significant enrollment declines, historic disinvestment of public higher education, continued loss of revenues from student housing, increased costs associated with the deferred maintenance and critical upgrades to our campus infrastructure. Nationally, our students are facing a mental health crisis exacerbated by the lasting effects of the pandemic and disruptions to their social, emotional, and educational development. While globally, they bear witness to one of the most serious international crises of their generation with the war between Russia and Ukraine. But we will persevere.

Over my tenure as CoP Chair, the state universities said farewell to Presidents Ramon Torrecilha, David Nelson and Roy Saigo and welcomed Presidents Linda Thompson and Mary Grant. We are also celebrating our colleague Javier Cevallos on his well-deserved retirement. Javier has been the president of Framingham State University for eight years. He is widely credited for championing inclusion on campus through a wide range of efforts.

In 2017, he hired the University's first chief diversity officer, and then elevated that position to vice president for diversity and inclusion in 2019 to show the value that the University puts on it.

Javier also instrumental in the acquisition of the Warren Conference Center & Inn in Ashland, which led to the launch of the Hospitality and Tourism Management major in 2019, the first of its kind in the state university system. Also, when facing eviction and unsustainable financial burden, he helped save the Danforth Art Museum, through a merger with the university foundation allowing it to continue to be a resource not only for the University, but for the greater Framingham community. As we wish him well on his retirement, we are thrilled to welcome Dr. Nancy Niemi to the State University system.

Commissioner Santiago, as your time with the Department comes to an end we are honored to have you as MCLA's Commencement speaker on May 14. While we will properly celebrate you and your accomplishments in just a couple of weeks, I wanted to highlight a few here. You have led the Department to develop the Commonwealth's first 10-year strategic plan to achieve racial equity in higher education, enabled thousands of high school students to enroll in early college courses for free, and developed a seamless system of credit transfer within the system.

It is because of your leadership and dedication that I can speak from a place of continued optimism today-- "with change comes opportunity." We are poised work with our students to foster resiliency, reengage with their activism, and stay true to our mission to serve the Commonwealth. Thank you, Carlos.

As this is my final report, I would like to close my remarks by expressing my deep appreciation to our state universities' faculty, staff, administrators and especially our students. I am forever grateful for the cooperation we have received from our campus communities over the past 2 years as we all worked together to minimize the impact of COVID at our institutions. In collaboration with public health experts, community leaders, emergency management professionals, the Executive Office of Education and your Department of Higher Education, our campuses essentially have been able to return to pre-pandemic operations and a robust campus life. It goes without saying that we couldn't have done it without all of us working together.

And to my 8 state university colleagues, I am grateful to your friendship and counsel over the past two years. I am honored that you entrusted me to represent our council, our system, and our students over the past two years.

As I transition out of this role, I can say with pride and confidence that the leadership of our state university system is dedicated and committed to ensuring that the mission of the state universities is fulfilled.

If there is anything you need in the future, please feel free to contact President Keenan.

Thank you