

3-23-2021 State University Segmental Report to the Board of Higher Education

OUTLINE AND DRAFT COMMENTS FOR SU SEGMENTAL REPORT

Good morning Chairman Gabrieli, Secretary Peyser, Commissioner Santiago and members of the Board of Higher Education. Thank you for the opportunity to provide an update on the Massachusetts State University System.

It was just a little over a year ago that we all began bracing for an unprecedented and almost unimaginable pandemic. With a strong Massachusetts economy, a judicious build-up of nearly \$4B in the state's rainy-day fund, and with the help of Federal COVID relief funds, the economic collapse feared just one year ago, did not materialize. In fact, our economy grew, people are getting back to work, our schools are reopening, the COVID positivity rate is under 2%, the state has moved into phase IV of the Governor's reopening plan, and now that vaccinations are being administered, there is an end in sight.

Looking back at this time last year, higher education leaders were working towards two goals... the first was ensuring the health and safety of our students and the second was not allowing the COVID pandemic to derail the education of our student body. With the support of this board, Secretary Peyser, Commissioner Santiago, his Department and with the help of our talented and dedicated workforce, I am pleased to say that we successfully accomplished both.

Throughout the pandemic, every state university provided direct or indirect support to local, regional, state and federal agencies. We committed campus resources to MEMA, DPH, area hospitals, health centers, municipalities and healthcare agencies to assist where needed. We donated PPE and other campus resources to help our communities prepare for the expected COVID surge. We offered campus facilities to emergency and frontline workers and supported our host communities in any way we could.

Exactly one year ago, all our campuses quickly transitioned from a largely on-campus and in-person academic community to an almost entirely remote instructional and operational platform. We vacated our dorms, moved all our classes online, and converted most of our employees to remote work. But, most importantly, we all managed to continue offering students high-quality and meaningful degree pathways. It is impossible to overstate my deep appreciation for the work that our state universities' faculty, staff, and students did over those first few months of the pandemic to ensure a successful transition to remote learning. We couldn't have done it without them.

In collaboration with public health experts, community leaders, emergency management professionals, the Executive Office of Education and your Department of Higher Education, each state university developed and operationalized a COVID return plan. The nine state university campuses successfully offered a safe learning and living environment for both the fall and spring semesters, with a mix of in-person and online classes. We installed plexiglass in campus classrooms, offices, restrooms, dining facilities and other public facing areas; we provided campus community members face masks and other PPE as necessary; we invested in enhanced cleaning and sanitizing practices; and we provided trainings for students, staff and faculty on ways to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Through the Broad Institute, our campuses implemented one of the most comprehensive COVID testing and tracing plan in the nation. Over the past year, we've administered nearly 300,000 tests to students, staff, and faculty and with complete buy-in from our campus communities, we were able to keep our average positivity rate below 1% for the system, well below the state average. Our robust testing

protocols remains in effect and will continue through the spring. We are evaluating surveillance testing protocols for the fall.

As we plan for the start of the 2021-2022 academic year, we will build upon the knowledge gained over the past year and will again offer students a full academic schedule, hopefully approaching pre-pandemic levels. We have heard clearly from our students that they want to return to campus for classes and on-campus housing and with the health and safety of our campus community as our number one priority.

We anticipate a return to the classroom, with courses designed as fully in-person, fully-remote or a HYBRID with a mix of in-person and online. We are planning for in-person lectures, socially distanced gathers, meetings, athletics, clubs and organization events. We also plan to expand on-campus housing opportunities for our students by returning to double rooms occupancy and allowing students more on-campus life activities to enrich their college experience.

One of the most important components of a successful repopulation of our campuses is to expand student support and outreach services for both our residential and commuter populations. We all recognize the disruption, stress and social isolation caused by the pandemic. Expanding support services for our students must be at the forefront of our planning. Across our nine-member system we are collaborating on best ways to ensure the physical and mental health of our students. Those support efforts are underway using CARES block grants and other resources available to us. We were particularly encouraged by the extension of the Mass Grant Plus program to State Universities to support our most financially vulnerable students as they complete their degrees. This is in line with the work that continued on each and every State University campus to move the DHE Equity Agenda forward, despite the pandemic.

However, as we look to expand our reopening for Fall 2021, we need your help. These plans to repopulate our campuses are only possible if state revisits certain COVID restrictions currently in place. We ask that classroom distance restrictions be modified to allow desks to be positioned three feet apart rather than from six feet between desks, room capacity caps need to be increased, lecture hall and gather restrictions relaxed, campus housing caps increased and dining services be permitted to resume. We believe that all this can be done safely, especially with the availability of the COVID-19 vaccine.

Lastly, speaking of vaccines, the single largest global super-spreader event that occurred during the pandemic was when college campuses around the world sent all students home when the pandemic hit. We would ask you to join us in our effort to get COVID vaccines pushed down to each public and private college in the Commonwealth, prior to commencement, in order to vaccinate our students before they leave campus for the summer. Almost all Massachusetts colleges and universities have the on-campus capabilities to run vaccination clinics and we believe offering students a COVID vaccine prior to returning home is in the best interest of the public health of our citizenry.

With an end to this pandemic in sight, we are all hopeful that a full return to on-campus life is possible and achievable. Thank you for allowing me an opportunity to tell you about our successes over the past year and to share with you our plans for the 2021-2022 academic year. I am happy to answer any questions you might have.