

## **State Universities BHE Segmental Report – May 4, 2021**

Good Morning, Chairman Gabrieli, Deputy Secretary Moreau, 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.

**New Presidents Welcome** --- Today, the BHE will be voting on the Massachusetts College of Art and Design BOT's selection of Maary K. Grant as president. Dr. Grant preceded me at MCLA and has a standing legacy of excellence here. Her commitment to public higher education is unmistakable. She will serve the Mass College of Art and Design with distinction. Equally as exciting is the selection of Dr. Linda Thompson to lead Westfield State University, my alma mater. I am grateful to the Mass Art and Westfield Boards for selecting such high-quality individuals to join the Council of Presidents and we welcome them with enthusiasm.

I begin my remarks by once again thanking the Board of Higher Education, Commissioner Santiago and Secretary Peyser for the continued support you have provided our State Universities during these unprecedented times. The Council of Presidents continues to appreciate the open lines of communication between the Department of Higher Education and Executive Office as we work to address the challenges facing our campuses. On behalf of my colleagues, we appreciate your continued support and guidance.

### **SU COVID Update**

Like all our colleagues at Massachusetts higher education institutions, this fall our state universities will offer a traditional schedule of in-person classes in addition to online and hybrid options for both residential and commuter student populations. Student safety and the safety of our communities remain at the forefront of our planning as we prepare to return to in-person learning and campus life in September. Throughout the pandemic, the State Universities have been leaders in the Stop the Spread Campaign and have made COVID-19 testing and contact tracing a priority on our campuses. Since returning to campus last year, the nine state universities have operationalized a robust on-campus COVID testing and tracing system for students, staff and faculty, which successfully resulted in helping to identify and contain the COVID virus in our campus communities.

The State Universities are committed to ending this pandemic with vigilance towards vaccinating our campus communities. To this end, the State Universities joined a growing number of colleges and universities across the country and Commonwealth requiring students to be vaccinated against COVID-19 before they attend in-person classes next fall.

My colleagues and I unanimously decided to require undergraduate and graduate students who are attending in-person classes, conducting research on campus, living in residence halls, or participating in campus life activities to become fully inoculated with an approved COVID-19 vaccine prior to the start of the 2021 academic year. We also expect that all employees will also be fully vaccinated prior to the start of the fall semester.

As prospective students are making admissions decisions and current students are deciding whether to return to campus in the fall, we made this decision to require vaccinations now to give students, their families and our employees ample time to make plans to be vaccinated prior to the start of the fall term.

I am happy to discuss this issue and answer any questions about our decision to require students to be vaccinated at the end of my remarks.

## **BUDGET**

Last week, the House wrapped up their FY22 budget deliberations. I am happy to report that the House fully funded our state universities line items, recapitalized the State Universities Formula Funding Account, restored our State University Internship Incentive earmark, funded the MassGrant Plus Program, and included \$5.3m for the Early College Program. The State Universities Council of Presidents wishes to thank this Board and your Department for your advocacy, and to express our sincere thanks to the Massachusetts House of Representatives for their continued support of our nine-member system.

We now turn our advocacy efforts to the Senate and seek to build upon the progress we made in the House last week. We welcome the advocacy of this board through this process.

## **TRANSCRIPT ISSUE**

I have been Chair of the State Universities Council of Presidents for the last year and have agreed to serve another term. Although my colleagues have cited my good work as the reason for me to continue, I suspect it is more the case that they know as an Irish Catholic I am accustomed to pain and suffering as constant companions. Thus, you will be stuck with me for another year. As Chair of the Council, I have the privilege of representing the system at your board meetings and sharing with you a report from our nine-member campus system. We truly appreciate and value the time afforded us during your meetings; especially over the past year as we worked to manage through the worst public health crisis in over a century. I am proud of the work we did, together, and thankfully we can see that there is an end in sight.

The time given to us at these meetings affords us an opportunity to update you on our system but it also allows us the opportunity to acknowledge your work, your goals, and your interests. Last week at the Academic Affairs Committee, board members discussed campus policies and practices for academic transcript holds. This issue is also under consideration by the legislature in the form of a bill filed in both the House and Senate. We recognize that board members are interested in learning more about campus practices and the extent to which these practices impact students; especially students who are struggling to afford college and those who might be disproportionately impacted by the practice.

We think that collecting data and information from our campuses is the first step in helping all of us better understand this issue. We know that campuses use academic transcript holds to collect unpaid bills but that transcript hold practices vary greatly from campus to campus. There are anecdotal reports that withholding transcripts is a widespread problem that denies students access to credits they have already earned and paid for. We agree with board members that we need to gather information to better understand the policies and practices of our institutions. The state universities, as well as our community colleges, would like to work with your department to collect information and data from our campuses and share that information with this board at a future meeting.

As you heard last week at your AAC meeting, state law requires our institutions to process student debt in accordance with the Debt Collection and Intercept regulations and not release a student from that obligation until the debt is paid. I know that our institutions work with students who have unpaid bills or outstanding debt to do all we can before taking the step of sending student debt to collections. Sending unpaid student accounts to a debt collection agency is not an action any of us want to take, however, our campuses have very few administrative tools available to collect outstanding debt.

Recognizing the importance of this issue and the interest the board has in determining the extent of the problem, our two system offices will collect information and data from our campuses to help inform the conversation, not only for this board and your department, but also for lawmakers who are considering legislation that would regulate the practice of withholding academic transcripts. We will develop an analysis of our campus policies and practices, determine the number of students impacted by these practices, calculate the amount of outstanding debt and perform a demographic analysis of those students most commonly affected by academic transcript holds. We will share that information and analysis with the Department and welcome further discussion with the board.

## **MCLA Campus Policing Strategies**

Finally, I want to share with you that the State Universities of Massachusetts continue to examine the policies and practices of our campus public safety/campus police departments to enhance our commitment to public safety and justice while creating a welcoming environment for our students, faculty, staff, and visitors. For example, my colleagues and students at MCLA have established a public safety oversight committee to review and implement recommendations from a task force I commissioned last summer following the murder of George Floyd. One of the recommendations being implemented is providing additional training for campus officers on a variety of areas that will enhance the environment and safety on campus. Using funds provided by the DHE through its Higher Education Innovation Fund, MCLA has engaged a consultant specializing in training campus public safety officers to enhance relationships with the campus community and the public while maintaining a safe environment. We all have much more work to do to create more diverse, equitable, and inclusive communities and I am grateful to the DHE and my colleagues and students for embracing these efforts.

Thank you for providing me with this opportunity to share this update from our state universities. I am happy to answer questions about our vaccination requirement or any other questions you might have about our state universities.