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COMMISSIONER'S SELF EVALUATION

Note. The following evaluation was submitted to the Board of Higher Education (BHE) on April 2, 2024.

INTRODUCTION

November 1, 2022, marked the completion of my first full year as Commissioner of Higher Education for the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education (DHE or Department) and, effectively in March of 2024, I entered month 16 of service in this role. It is also worth highlighting that I stepped into the role during the final months of an outgoing administration (Baker-Polito) and the start of a new administration (Healey-Driscoll). When I arrived, the Department was nearly halfway through the Fiscal Year 2023 (FY23) budget, and I had to immediately hit the ground running on the development of the FY24 budget with the incoming administration. With this context in mind, any success attributed to me in the first part of my tenure as Commissioner was only made possible by the support I received from the Board of Higher Education (Board or BHE) and the team at the Department.

The unconventional start date to my role as Commissioner also dictates why I bring forth my self-evaluation at this juncture in my tenure and at this point in the fiscal year. In discussions with Chair Gabrieli, we determined that it made sense to allow enough time to go by so that I could establish a complete body of work on which to base my evaluation. Thus, altering the timeline for submission of my evaluation provided a long enough runway to establish key goals and priorities that could be used as the basis for an evaluation of a full calendar year. To that end we established the following goals and priorities for year one:

1. Focus on Stakeholder Engagement and Establish a Culture of Systemness;
2. Expand Capacity and Continue to Recruit Talent and Expertise to the Leadership Team;
3. Improve Efficiencies and Outputs at the Department; and
4. Fine Tune the Department's Focus and Establish Clear and Concise Priorities.

The sections that follow provide members of the BHE with a self-assessment of my progress toward the above stated goals for the period of November 1, 2022 – December 31, 2023. Additionally, I have included a few additional goals for FY24 and FY25 that will assist the Board in the assessment of my performance in the year ahead.

GOALS FOR FISCAL YEAR 2023

Goal One: Focus on Stakeholder Engagement and Establish a Culture of Systemness

Recognizing that I was new to both the role of Commissioner and to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, I made it a goal to focus on engaging with key stakeholders for the department to build community around the idea of systemness. In an effort to make this goal achievable within the time constraints of the various functions of my role, particular attention was given to the following key constituencies: a) presidents of our public colleges and universities, including UMass; b) members of the Board of Higher Education; c) leaders of the various associations representing

community colleges, state universities, and independent colleges and universities; d) chairs of local boards of trustees at our state universities and community colleges; and e) affinity groups representing Chief Academic Officers (CAOs), Chief Financial Officers (CFOs), and Financial Aid Officers (FAOs) from our public colleges and universities. Apart from the affinity groups and chairs for the local boards of trustees, I met with stakeholders individually, in-person, and in some cases on multiple occasions.

Each of the meetings that occurred over the course of several months were focused on two central themes: 1) a reintroduction of myself and my leadership approach, and 2) a discussion about how we can best work together as a system (systemness) to ensure the provision of high quality, affordable postsecondary opportunities for all students. The decision to make systemness a central part of each discussion was predicated on the need to introduce and establish a framework by which to guide our discussions pertaining to any issues, problems, concerns, or solutions that come before the Department or Board. The underlying assumption embedded in a systemness framework posits that the Department's primary role is to create or enhance the conditions needed for all institutions to work toward a set of shared goals established for a unified system of public higher education that serves the Commonwealth.

The feedback I received at each of the meetings was positive and the framework resonated with all stakeholders. In the end, except for a few scheduling challenges, I was able to meet with most individuals and groups that were identified at the outset of this process. A number of these interactions have now been incorporated into the recurring meeting schedule of the Department and we continue to work toward maximizing our engagement with our institutional partners and build toward a systemness approach to our efforts.

Goal Two: Expand Capacity and Continue to Recruit Talent and Expertise to the Leadership Team

Upon arriving at the Department, one of my top priorities was to expand capacity at the Department and recruit additional talent and expertise to the leadership team. At the time, several key positions, which included the roles of Chief Academic Officer (CAO) and Chief Financial Officer (CFO), were filled by individuals holding interim roles. Additionally, there were vacancies in the areas of communications and government relations that had experienced recent departures and were never backfilled by the Department. One of the challenges the department routinely faces when filling positions is that over the years the agency has experienced reductions in the number of full-time positions available for hire. Thus, it was imperative that in addition to backfilling much needed vacancies, there would also be a need to advocate for additional full-time hires to be added to the total complements of the Department.

A fully staffed Department of Higher Education was crucial to meeting the needs of stakeholders, especially at a time of change in higher education. The Department worked closely with the Executive Office of Education (EOE) and Executive Office for Administration and Finance (A&F) to develop a plan for establishing new positions while also initiating a national search for the positions of the CFO and CAO. Our plan called for the restructuring of the Commissioner's Office to include a Senior Deputy Commissioner for the Department to work alongside the Commissioner. We also proposed the establishment of a new Policy Office and created a new position for a Deputy Commissioner for Policy. Several other positions were added to the Offices of Research and

Planning, Financial Assistance, and the office of our Chief Legal Counsel, and we further proposed creating a Director of Board and Trustee Relations position. In the end, we were given the green light for our plan and by September of 2023—nearly 10 months into my tenure—we welcomed five new members to the executive team and backfilled nearly 10 positions throughout the various offices of the Department. As we get set to enter the second phase of our restructuring process at the Department, we continue to expand our capacity to deliver on the vision and priorities of the Board and the Department more effectively.

Goal Three: Improve Efficiencies and Outputs at the Department

Efforts made to engage with key partners and stakeholders during the first few months of my tenure also presented an opportunity to conduct an environmental scan of the field and learn more about the perceptions and assumptions held of the Department and its work. The feedback I received during these interactions produced helpful insight into the bright spots and limitations of the agency. These insights allowed me to direct my leadership and attention in year one to areas of top concern to the field and toward issues that, if resolved immediately, could serve as quick wins for the agency. In short, I learned that many of the Department's processes lacked efficiency and transparency. While some of these concerns could be attributed to a lack in capacity at the Department, several individuals pointed out that many of the concerns they raised predated periods in which the Department capacity was lacking. Equally concerning to individuals was that, quite often, these inefficiencies would affect routine outputs that the field had come to rely on from the department. Some of the outputs that were routinely cited include predictability around the disbursement of financial aid, approval of new academic programs, timely release of grant proposals and the distribution of grants awarded to a campus, to name just a few.

Recognizing that it would be challenging to address all these concerns at once—particularly if we were looking to achieve quick and meaningful impact—we directed our efforts to improving efficiencies and outputs in the areas of financial aid, the administration of our grant programs, and the distribution of appropriated dollars. Each of these areas represent some of the most public facing aspects of the Department's work, and they also happen to be priorities that were closely tied to Governor Healey's year one budget priorities for higher education and the Board's recent endorsement of the SHEF work—making them the most obvious areas of focus to the Department. Our strategy was simple: direct the efforts of the entire commissioner's team toward these key areas—thereby offsetting shortfalls in capacity and possibly leading to more efficient processes. Next, we worked with the Board to make sure we had the appropriate regulatory authority to expedite the disbursement of funds to institutions once the budget received final approval. Lastly, we convened CFOs, institutional leaders, financial aid officers, and communications staff regularly and engaged them in the development and improvement of our processes.

In the end, the Department was able to improve the timeliness of its distribution of funds to institutions and students. Additionally, we were able to expedite the release of some of our grant applications and ultimately award new funds to our institutions more efficiently. Although we did achieve some quick wins, there remains more work to do in this area of the Department's purview. Improving efficiency of outputs at the Department will likely require changes to the infrastructure and the integration of new technology that could modernize its approach. This will also likely require a significant investment of funds. Additionally, to fully achieve our goal of improved

efficiency, the Department will need to change the way it plans, communicates, and delivers on our core functions and processes—only then will we be able to become more efficient and improve the reliability of the Department.

Goal Four: Fine Tune the Department’s Focus and Establish Clear and Concise Priorities

The Healey-Driscoll Administration’s Fiscal Year 2024 (FY24) budget process presented the Board and the Department with an opportunity to influence and shape funding priorities, largely due to the recent passage of the Fair Share Amendment (Fair Share). Recognizing this moment, the Board and the Department moved quickly in the preceding months to develop and approve a Strategic Higher Education Finance (SHEF) Framework, which posited a set of guiding principles and goals to guide strategies for investment by the Administration in higher education. In the final weeks of the 2022 calendar year, the Board voted to approve the SHEF Framework and further charged the Commissioner with the task of aligning the state’s funding and policy priorities to the goals and principles established by the SHEF framework. During the months that followed, the Department worked with the Board to put forth a memo to the Secretary calling, in large part, for the doubling of financial aid to help make college more affordable and a similar investment in student success efforts at our public institutions. While this strategy deviated from past efforts by the Department and Board in promulgating budget recommendations to the Administration, the political circumstances created a unique opportunity to leverage the Board’s governing authority.

What resulted from the series of steps taken by the Board and the Department was that our efforts were able to shape the investments made by the Healey-Driscoll administration and ultimately expand the state’s financial aid programs to make college more truly affordable for low-income students and moderately affordable for middle class families making less than \$100,000 per year. The clear and concise focus of the Department on a few key priorities allowed the agency to achieve a critical win for the goals established by the SHEF work. In the end, the success of this strategy can be best characterized by the following highlights that were included in the FY24 budget:

- \$25 million to implement a MassReconnect Program, which provides Free Tuition and Fees and a \$1,200 book and supply allowance for any student 25 years of age or older attending any of the state’s 15 community colleges;
- \$84 million to expand the state’s MASSGrant Program in the following manner:
 - Ensure that Pell Grant-eligible students receiving a MASSGrant Plus award are provided with free tuition and fees while attending any of our public two- or four-year institutions, and receive an additional \$1,200 allowance for books or other expenses;
 - Broaden the MASSGrant Plus program to include middle class families, making an adjusted gross income of \$100,000 or less, eligible to receive an award for up to half of their out-of-pocket expenses toward tuition and fees at any public two- or four-institution in the Commonwealth;
 - Make part-time students attending any of the state’s four-year public institutions eligible for a MASSGrant Plus award; and
 - Expand eligibility of the state’s financial aid programs to undocumented students as part of the recently passed Tuition Equity law.

- After being ranked 26th in the nation for its investment in student aid, we now estimate that Massachusetts is the 12th leading state for its investment in need-based aid.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Year one of my tenure as commissioner was foundational for team building, stakeholder engagement, the improvement of efficiencies, and the promulgation of a culture focused on a system-centered approach to the work and role of the Department. My own assessment of this past year is one of success coupled with good fortune that came in the form of more than \$300 million in new state investments in higher education. This allowed us to nearly double our investments in financial aid and take a much-needed leap toward making college truly affordable for Pell Grant-eligible students and moderately affordable for families making \$100,000 or less. While there were some new investments in resources made to our institutions to assist with student support services and capital investment, there remains more work to do in this area.

The remaining work includes the Department truly establishing the capacity and expertise needed to better serve its institutions and the students of the Commonwealth. It must also continue to build on some of the lessons learned from its work this past year and apply these learnings to the strategies it establishes for the new year. With that in mind, the following goals have been developed to help direct my efforts, and that of the Department in the coming year. The 2024-2025 academic year goals I propose for my role as Commissioner are as follows:

- Establish key multi-year top priorities and near-term action agendas with the board that can be utilized to focus the efforts of the BHE and DHE on a few, accountable policy imperatives.
- Improve the Department's engagement with the Board including, working with the Chair, the structure of Board and Board "committee" meetings, agendas, and the communication of Department work to all members of the Board.
- Continue to improve the efficiencies and outputs of the Department.
- Establish the Board and the Department as a more visible and engaged key resource in policy development to the field, with state policymakers and with stakeholders from across the civic, philanthropic, and community domains.