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MEMORANDUM

TO: Board of Higher Education
FROM: Carlos E. Santiago, Commissioner
DATE: August 10, 2020
SUBJECT: **COVID-19 Response**

I hope this finds you and members of your family well, and that you have been able to enjoy some much-needed summer respite despite the current, difficult circumstances facing our communities and our world.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created unprecedented challenges for the Department (DHE) and the campuses, students, faculty, and staff that we serve. This memo provides a comprehensive update on public higher education's pandemic response just a few weeks prior to the start of the fall semester. The information below and the attached document, prepared by DHE's senior staff, are organized in response to specific questions posed by members of the BHE. I hope to provide an additional update on the Department's "other" summer work projects and commitments in a forthcoming memo that you'll receive before Labor Day.

I. Role of the BHE in setting conditions for campus decision-making on response to COVID-19

While the Board of Higher Education (BHE) has very broad coordinating authority, each college and university is required to establish its own individual plan on whether and how to safely reopen or re-populate their campuses this fall, based on the needs of each campus community it serves, current public health mandates and guidance, and all applicable laws and executive orders. This approach is consistent with the institutions' statutory authority, which vests in each local board of trustees the responsibility to establish "those policies necessary for the administrative management of personnel, staff services and the general business of the institution under its authority." M.G.L. c.15A, § 22. DHE staff work closely with representatives from the Executive Office of Education (EOE) and each segment to discuss challenges and best practices, disseminate DPH and other state guidance, and to coordinate responses, where applicable. EOE is taking the

lead in facilitating these conversations and helping us to connect the campuses with the Department of Public Health Command Center, and to help facilitate the issuance of relevant guidance in this area.

In terms of statewide coordinating or governing guidance in this realm, we are all looking to the Governor's [Reopening Massachusetts](#) framework. The framework includes sector-specific safety protocols, guidance, and requirements for public and private higher education developed based on currently available epidemiological research, best practices, and stakeholder input. The higher education-specific protocols, guidelines, and requirements ([Reopening-Higher-Education](#)), include [Mandatory-Safety-Standards](#) for all workplaces, and what is called the Phase III [Higher-Education-COVID-19-Control-Plan](#). As you will see, the Control Plan requires the institutions to self-certify that they have adopted the minimum, mandatory workplace safety requirements and to certify whether their fall plans are in alignment with the considerations of the Massachusetts Higher Education COVID-19 Working Group; the complementary document [Safe on Campus](#) is also available to institutions. While Control Plans are not required to be submitted for state review or approval, all public and private higher education institutions are expected to complete the documents and make them available for inspection as may be warranted, and are encouraged to have the documents accessible on their websites.

In addition, while the BHE may not be actively involved in setting new conditions for campus response to COVID-19, 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 referenced above. By way of example, Department staff are:

- actively engaged with campus administrators to help troubleshoot issues related to campus re-populating/ 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 on-going 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 LOI/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.

II. COVID-era Learning Modalities: Current Status

Community Colleges: The community colleges as a segment are primarily offering remote coursework, in a variety of modalities, with very limited in-person classes (often these include work that cannot successfully be accomplished in a remote environment such as labs and nursing practicums). This approach is best classified as "hybrid with limited in-person classes."

State Universities: The State Universities are primarily offering a truly hybrid/blended approach to coursework, in a variety of modalities, with completely remote options, hybrid of remote and in-person, and limited fully in-person classes. In most cases, in-person classes have been modified to adhere to social distancing and other public health protocols through the use of larger spaces, limiting the numbers of persons in a classroom space at one time, and offering alternatives as needed. As of August 6th, all State U residence halls plan to open to a limited extent. The configuration and capacity will differ by campus.

University of Massachusetts. The UMASS system is largely utilizing a hybrid model with limited in-person classes as well. Some campuses are limiting in-person coursework to labs and other essential hands-on courses, while others are holding in-person classes in a blended model, adhering to social distancing and other public health protocols. Residence halls will be open; configuration and capacity will differ by campus. On August 6th UMass Amherst reversed its prior decision to welcome students back to campus, barring all but those who have "essential" in-person classes from living in residence halls. The University will also discourage students from returning to off-campus housing by prohibiting their use of campus facilities such as fitness centers and dining halls.

A detailed campus-by-campus overview of reopening plans is attached.

III. Budgets and Cost Management

Community colleges and state universities have adopted provisional budgets for FY21 that include working assumptions about state appropriations, enrollment forecasts, auxiliary revenue losses, and increased costs owing to necessary response and mitigation strategies to deal with the coronavirus and re-populate campuses for the Fall term. The EY-Parthenon presentation at the June Board meeting did not specifically include, but did allude to certain cost management options that the campuses might pursue to offset projected net revenue losses from various COVID-19 related scenarios, including dormitory vacancies, lower than projected enrollment for the Fall term, and state appropriations at or below FY20 GAA levels. Some of the campuses, including Salem State University, Westfield State University, and Fitchburg State University have formally requested authority to negotiate with the exclusive representatives of union members to address cost and revenue offsets, including, but not limited to, staff furloughs. Some colleges have proposed eliminating or reducing program offerings after analyzing the

projected demand and costs of those courses. In addition, the Governor has approved an allocation of funds from the \$50.8 million discretionary budget from the CARES Act to assess further the financial impacts of COVID-19 on state universities and community colleges, and that work is expected to take place from mid-August through mid-December.

IV. Status of Lay-offs, Furloughs and Other Employment Decisions

The measures taken by the institutions have included lay-offs/retrenchments of union and Non-Unit Personnel (NUP) employees, furloughs of union and NUP employees, the offering of Early Retirement Incentive Plans (ERIP) and the delay of re-appointing certain part-time employees. As of August 6, the Department was aware of lay-offs/retrenchments at eight of the community colleges, with approximately 522 (mostly part-time) employees impacted.

(Please see below for a campus-by-campus overview of COVID-related employment decisions.)

V. Innovations in Distance Learning; Meeting Student Needs in Crisis

With community colleges planning to teach almost all courses online and state universities and UMass campuses committed to hybrid learning models, there is a concerted effort underway to improve the remote learning experience for students.

Here are a few specific examples of distance learning innovations and the on-going work to address student needs during the crisis:

Berkshire Community College faculty developing online/hybrid courses for the fall (including 98% of FT faculty) are participating in an intensive 4-week workshop this summer, designed in-house, and founded in equity-minded teaching practices. Rather than simply learning to use technology tools for teaching, faculty are critically examining their course materials – from a student perspective and through an equity lens – and making substantial changes. Examples of equity-minded practices being employed include assignment redesign for increased transparency (using the TILT framework, which has proven to have positive impacts on course-level outcomes for students from underrepresented groups).

Bunker Hill Community College and Cape Cod Community College are implementing virtual science labs for the first time. At the Four C's, Dental Hygiene students were unable to graduate because they could not complete their lab work in the Spring semester. In July, the College created an on-campus "boot camp" which allowed students to complete their lab work virtually over several days, becoming eligible for graduation.

Fitchburg State University has hosted more than 30 digital training sessions this summer for 500 faculty and staff. The training has focused on no-cost and low-cost applications that faculty can incorporate into either asynchronous or synchronous classes. One such application, Discord, is already well known to many students and therefore means a very short learning curve for use in their courses. It allows them to present videos in online classes such as game design and freehand drawing. FSU's Education Department will use a digital simulation program that allows teacher candidates to practice teaching in front of "live" avatars.

Framingham State University trained 230 faculty on remote learning strategies in just two days last spring. They have upgraded their technology infrastructure and also invested in a yearly membership in Quality Matters, a non-profit providing courses and professional development to improve the quality of online learning. And yet, like other campuses, Framingham is reporting shortages of essential items such as headsets with microphones, video cameras to record classes, and mobile hot spots.

Northern Essex Community College: Prior to the pandemic, Northern Essex taught 23% of its courses fully online. This fall, 90% of its courses will be taught remotely, including STEM and health courses that have never been taught online before. To better support students, NECC is investing \$100,000 in a new peer-to-peer ambassador program. "Carefully selected for their prior success in online courses, each member of the team of 15 to 20 ambassadors will spend 10 hours a week reaching out to students and connecting them with college resources, such as IT, the library, academic coaching, tutoring and more, all of which are offering remote and virtual services during the pandemic. Ambassadors, who will be paid \$12.75 an hour, will communicate with students using a new chat tool, email, texts, phone, and Blackboard, the college's learning management system. Students who seem to be struggling will be referred to an ambassador by a faculty member."

Through Roxbury Community College's new RoxSTARS technology program, every RCC student in need of a laptop will receive one at no additional cost. In the sudden rush to make more than 350 classes available online at a moment's notice when the COVID-19 crisis hit, RCC distributed more than 100 laptops last spring and made it possible for students to access courses on smartphones. The College also purchased and distributed 50 hotspots to increase student Wi-Fi access and worked directly with cell phone data providers to encourage them to increase data usage at no extra cost to students.

Multiple campuses report increases in student complaints of depression and isolation and are attempting to address these concerns by making virtual support services available and by direct staff outreach. Bunker Hill Community College mobilized its entire staff to call 800 students who "disappeared" when the College went remote in early spring. More than 200 students returned to classes as a direct result of the outreach. In six regions of the state, state universities in partnership with nearby community colleges and community-based youth service organizations continue to support homeless

students who are housed through a state-funded pilot program. These students receive dorm housing, meal plans, and direct case management services.

VI. Resources

The Department has created a comprehensive [COVID-19 resources page](#) on its web site. It includes the most recent guidance issued by the state for public and private higher education institutions, including links to relevant executive orders, the [Mass.gov Reopening: Higher Education resource page](#), and a link to the more specific Phase III [Higher-Education-COVID-19-Control-Plan](#), referenced above.

VII. Final Thoughts

The DHE is singularly focused on the reopening of our public higher education institutions this fall (in whatever form that might take) as well as the financial risks they currently face. We are also monitoring the financial health of private institutions, both non-profit and for-profit, in response to the recent changes in our oversight and regulatory responsibilities. I welcome and encourage BHE members to ask questions and submit concerns, comments, and suggestions as we navigate these difficult waters. I appreciate the encouragement and support DHE staff have received from many of you as they engage in this important work.

**State University and Community College Personnel Actions/Budget Reduction
Actions due to COVID-19 Pandemic as of August 4, 2020**

I. Community Colleges

1. Middlesex, 4/8/20, retrenchment of 11 Part-time MCCC employees and lay-off of 66 "03" PT employees
2. Middlesex, 4/10/20, lay-off of 5 AFSCME employees
3. QCC, lay-off of 27 "03" PT employees
4. BHCC, 4/14/20, retrenchment of MCCC part-time employees, 35 PT MCCC employees and 109 PT "03" employees
5. Bristol, 4/14/20, retrenchment/lay-off of 35 PT MCCC employees and 109 "03" PT employees
6. STCC, 4/17/20, lay-off of 80 "03" employees
7. Berkshire, 5/4/20, lay-off of 3 AFSCME employees
8. BHCC, 5/17/20, delay re-appointment of MCCC part-time professional staff employees
9. GCC, 5/19/20, delay re-appointment of MCCC part-time professional staff employees
10. GCC, 5/21/20, lay-off of 2 AFSCME Maintainers and 2 Recreation employees
11. BHCC, 5/28/20, ERIP offered to all employees
12. CCCC, 6/5/20, delay re-appointing MCCC PT professional staff
13. STCC, 6/10/20, ERIP offered to all employees
14. NECC, 6/12/20, retrenchment of 12 MCCC staff and 4 AFSCME employees
15. STCC, 6/12/20, retrenchment of 10 MCCC faculty and professional staff
16. GCC, 6/20/20, furlough program of AFSCME employees, 1 day per week
17. QCC, 6/22/20, closure of Early Childhood Center including retrenchment of 12 MCCC employees (5 PT),

18. Middlesex, 6/29/20, no re-appointment of 36 MCCC part-time professional staff

19. BHCC, 7/10/20, ERIP/cost-cutting actions per contract offered to employees on a voluntary basis such as a 10-month contract, unpaid leave of absence or reduced work week.

20. Massasoit, 7/16/20, ERIP/cost-cutting actions per contract offered to employees on a voluntary basis such as a 10-month contract, unpaid leave of absence or reduced work week.

II. State Universities

As a result of inquiries from several of the universities, the Commissioner, on June 25, 2020, provided guidance to State Universities on the procedures to be followed regarding the implementation of any employee furlough program. As a result of the guidance, the following institutions took furlough actions:

1. Salem State University, July 2020, Salem initially proposed a five-week furlough to its bargaining units. NUPS were also subject to the furlough plan. After impact bargaining, a furlough program was agreed to with the AFSCME and APA units. Furloughs shall consist of up to four weeks, two weeks to be served prior to December 31, 2020. The parties will meet in November/December to determine whether the University needs employees to take the remainder of the total furlough amount. Discussions with the MSCA are on-going.

2. Two other universities, Fitchburg and Westfield, in July 2020, have also requested and have been granted authority to negotiate and implement employee furlough programs. Final furlough plans have not yet been finalized.