

RMF Comments at Workforce Board Association 6-21-11

Intro

(Thanks for invitation; glad to be here)

I welcome the opportunity to address jobs and workforce development issues, and to talk with you about the role and responsibility of public higher education in this context.

It goes without saying that both job growth and workforce training are among the most important issues we face as a state and as a nation. They are essential to the well being and opportunity of both recent high school graduates who look to public higher education to prepare them to participate in the economy.

And they are essential to older, nontraditional students who wish to upgrade their skills, or perhaps have lost their jobs during the recent downturn and need to retool. They are essential to immigrants who need language training in conjunction with job skills.

And they are essential to our collective well being as a state whose population is not growing and which needs all the well trained, college educated workers we can get to drive our knowledge dependent economy.

I want to begin by assuring you as Commissioner of Higher Education that I fully understand the importance of job-related education and workforce development as critically important responsibilities of public higher education.

It is a top priority of mine to make sure that we are doing everything we reasonably can to meet the needs of individuals, of employers and of the state in this arena.

Against this backdrop I'd like to use by time this afternoon to discuss two things:

- First, a major initiative of the Board of Higher Education called the Vision Project that identifies workforce development as a foundational responsibility of public higher education in Massachusetts;

-Second, the particular challenges of offering effective job related education for nontraditional students, which I know is a central concern for many of you.

Let me also say that in talking about what we in public higher education are doing on these matters, and how we view them, I also understand that this is an arena where we will only succeed through collaboration and partnership with the workforce support and training communities as well as the employer community; so we approach this topic very much in the spirit of partnership with the people in this room and I am as eager to learn your perspective on these matters as I am to share with you the perspective of public higher education. I hope we can continue our interaction after today's session.

The Vision Project

Let me turn now to the Vision Project, which is a major initiative of the Department of Higher Education. We believe that our foundational responsibilities are twofold:

- First, we need to produce *the best educated citizenry and workforce in the nation*
- Second, we need to be national leaders in research that drives economic development.

That's it: we do lots of other things, of course, we offer a wide variety of educational programs and many public services and many forms of research—but the heart of the matter is that the state needs us to produce the best educated citizenry and workforce in the nation and to be national leaders in research that drives economic development.

Workforce development - in the broadest sense, the cultivation of the productive talent of all our people - is at the very center of our vision of what we are about. So what needs to be true for public higher education to say that we are doing all we can to carry out this core responsibility?

-Five things need to be true: [list Vision project key outcomes]

Over the past year we have worked with our colleagues on the state's 29 campuses to focus attention on these five Vision Project educational goals—to make sure they are a central part of what each of our campuses is doing in the realm of education.

We have worked to identify the most effective policies and programs we can put in place to make progress on each of these goals and to set aspiration goals for national leadership in each of these areas.

A year from now, in spring 2012, we intend to issue the first Vision Project report in which we will document our standing in comparison with other states as part of a continuing process of accountability to the state.

Workforce Development

-We have identified two major challenges in this arena:

-First, the promotion of a true workforce development system and plan for the state that systematically links the work of higher education to the needs of employers and the work of the workforce support and training communities

- This focus reflects our realization that there is currently no such mechanism, no vehicle through which the state systematically articulates its anticipated workforce needs in a way that we in public higher education can make sure that we are making appropriate provision to meet them.

That's not to say there are not many ways and many groups working to anticipate and meet workforce needs but these efforts are generally fragmented, limited to links between particular campuses and particular employers, or focused on the needs of particular constituencies.

Under a charge from Governor Patrick we are working with our colleagues in the Department of Labor and Workforce Development and the Department of Housing and Economic Development on workforce plans in four high growth areas—health care, IT, life sciences and advanced manufacturing.

In this work we have paid particular attention to the role of community colleges because of the widely understood need for educational opportunities at the

certificate and associate degree levels. I'll say a bit more about this work in a few moments.

The second aspect of our workforce-specific work within the Vision Project involves the promotion of STEM education at every level from elementary school through our colleges and universities. This priority reflects the widely understood need for more young people to commit themselves to these fields at a time when our economy is heavily driven by innovation in science and technology and when we have become far too dependent on foreign nationals to sustain our scientific and engineering work in both higher education and in industry. The Department of Higher Education is providing staff support for the Governor's STEM coordinating council. It took the lead in developing a statewide STEM plan involving educators, employers, and the training community. It has set a goal of interesting more young people in STEM and then making sure they persist in STEM majors.

Workforce Development for Adult Workers

So far—in speaking about the Vision Project and in describing the aspects of that project specifically related to workforce development—I have been speaking about work targeted towards all students. But I am acutely aware that public higher education also serves older students, many of them working adults, many of them recent immigrants, who come to us to improve their job skills and enlarge their prospects in our rapidly changing and highly competitive economy.

Such students frequently seek out our community colleges as the starting point of their educational work and the entry point to public higher education, so the work of the community colleges must necessarily pay particular attention to the educational needs and challenges of nontraditional students.

This aspect of our responsibilities in workforce development has become an increasingly prominent focus of our activities over the course of the current academic year and we have undertaken a major effort to understand the needs

of such students and how traditional patterns of educational work need to be adapted to serve such students effectively.

One context for this work has been our work on an application for federal funds under a \$20 million Department of Labor grant, which has brought together all fifteen community colleges to develop a comprehensive plan for serving trade-affected workers.

A second context has been our charge from the governor to identify ways that our community colleges can serve nontraditional students even more effectively than they are currently doing.

These activities have focused our attention on several issues where we believe new approaches and new educational modalities are urgently needed. One of these is developmental education. Many nontraditional students come to us with only modest academic backgrounds. They need developmental education

to be ready for college level work. Traditional patterns of remediation are not effective (mention one new success model: Quinsigamond 2- week boot camp.)

A second issue that we know needs to be addressed is scheduling. Colleges operate on a semester basis with courses and programs starting and stopping on traditional academic schedules. But older students, especially those who are out of work and very focused on acquiring skills that will make them employable right away, cannot afford to wait several months for new program cycles to start (mention experimental program at Middlesex cc—Academy of health professions -cohort model; accelerated work.)

A third issue of concern to nontraditional students is the portability of credits earned at one level or at one institution to other institutions because a student may need to change the venue of their education in the course of completing a program or even attend classes at multiple venues. Students want to know that credits earned in a certificate or associates program will be helpful to them if they decide to pursue a more advanced credential at a later date. Therefore the development of more effective mechanisms for applying credits earned at one

community college to a program at another college or to a four year institution is also a major focus of our work.

This has been a major focus of our work with a group of hospitals in the Boston area that are particularly eager to foster educational opportunities and career ladders for their incumbent workers. It is also the focus of a major proposal we have recently submitted to obtain funding to develop an on-line course to course and program to program equivalency library through which students can know quickly and easily which courses taken at one institution will count toward progress in programs at other public institutions.

A fourth issue is what I would call the alignment issue: making sure the programs we offer are properly aligned with real workforce opportunity. Earlier this year through a collaboration between life science employers and our community colleges life science programs, 8 of our community colleges received certifications from the life sciences industry, recognition that their programs focused on competencies essential to careers in that field. We are seeking to

establish similar patterns of assuring alignment in the other high growth fields I mentioned earlier—health care, IT and advanced manufacturing.

Conclusion

We know there is a lot of work still to be done but we are focused and, I believe, have targeted a set of issues that will require further attention as our efforts continue in the months ahead.

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to discuss our activities in the area of workforce related education with you but let me also emphasize that our efforts are a work in progress and must be part of an ongoing dialogue with both the employer community and the workforce support and training communities.

I am eager to keep this discussion going and invite you to visit our web site at www.mass.edu to learn more about the activities I have described today. Look under the tab “Contact us” and you’ll find my email address, enabling you to send me a message or ask me a question. I look forward to hearing from you

**and to working with you to make sure that Massachusetts does, indeed,
possess the best educated citizenry and workforce in the nation. Thank you.**