

April 29, 2020

Commissioner Carlos E. Santiago
Massachusetts Department of Higher Education
One Ashburton Place, Room 1401
Boston, MA 02108

Dear Commissioner Santiago,

Thank you for all you are doing for Massachusetts students and institutions of higher education as they respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. We write because in this moment of crisis, we believe that there are steps that DHE is uniquely positioned to take to support students. We are confident that you are already taking some of these actions and hope that our suggestions supplement your ongoing efforts.

The Massachusetts Education Equity Partnership is a collective effort of social justice, civil rights and education organizations from across the Commonwealth that are working together to advance equity in our education system. Our Partners include organizations who work with students in high school transitioning to higher education, as well as with students currently enrolled in college; as such, our recommendations are based on our students' experiences

This pandemic puts a spotlight on longstanding educational inequities, as this crisis is taking a disproportionate toll on people of color and low-income families. It is crucial to respond through the lens of DHE's equity-focused framework to ensure students can stay enrolled and continue their education.

We believe it is critical for institutions of higher education across the state to hear from DHE that equity considerations must be at the forefront at this time. Our recommendations fall into five categories:

- Delay the state financial aid deadline and institutional decision & deposit deadlines
- Centralize clear, and regular communication about financial aid policies
- Provide guidance on equitable disbursement of the Federal CARES Act emergency aid
- Identify state funding to support students who have DACA/TPS status
- Increase access to Internet and technology - to ensure shift to distance learning doesn't leave students from low-income backgrounds behind

1. Delay the May 1 state financial aid deadline and the May 1 college decision and deposit deadlines for public institutions in Massachusetts

The Massachusetts priority deadline for completing the FAFSA is May 1, a rapidly approaching date. Students need more time to handle their academic and personal challenges that may have caused them to delay working on the FAFSA. Additionally, financial circumstances and realities for students and families are uncertain. Changing the FAFSA deadline to June 1 would provide this flexibility.

Many colleges have May 1 decision deadlines for incoming students. Given the level of uncertainty students are operating under right now in the pandemic, there is an opportunity to put students at the center by encouraging public colleges in Massachusetts to shift the decision deadlines to June 1 at the earliest.

2. Centralize clear and regular communication about financial aid policies and navigating how to pay for college

Institutions and students are navigating an enormous volume of information related to COVID-19, even as they deal with family members getting sick, job loss, and the abrupt mid-semester transition to distance learning. DHE has an opportunity to support students by:

- a. Consolidating information about federal and state policy changes to financial aid centrally on the DHE website
- b. Providing guidance to institutions to have COVID-19 webpages that includes current information about:
 - i. Financial aid policies and deadlines
 - ii. Enrollment (such as how to withdraw from classes and changes to grading policies)
 - iii. Emergency funds related to the CARES Act

3. Provide guidance on equitable disbursement of the federal CARES Act emergency aid

It is critical that federal emergency aid reaches students with the highest need. We encourage DHE to consider the recommendations recently issued by the [Hope Center for Community, College, and Justice](#). As highlighted by our colleagues at the Hope Center, institutions need to think through how to identify which students have the most financial need and disseminate funding with the goal of supporting persistence to degree completion for students from low-income backgrounds and students of color. In-line with [DHE's Equity Agenda](#), we suggest you offer guidance to institutions to prioritize students that have historically been underserved and underrepresented, especially students of color. We suggest DHE focus on Pell eligible students and those who are now Pell eligible because of their changed economic situation. Given the one-year timeline for spend down, DHE should encourage quick dissemination to students to address immediate students' basic needs shortfalls.

We also recommend that DHE coordinate with other state agencies and institutions of higher education to streamline access for students to any existing emergency aid and economic security programs like unemployment benefits, SNAP, affordable housing programs, etc.

4. Identify state funding to support students who have DACA/TPS status

Since students with DACA/TPS status are ineligible for federal aid under the CARES Act, we recommend that DHE work to identify state funding to support these especially vulnerable young people in these challenging times.

5. Increase access to internet and technology to ensure shift to distance learning doesn't leave students from low-income backgrounds behind

With the transition to distance learning, many students are having challenges accessing reliable internet and necessary technology to participate in their classes. In Massachusetts, 37% of households with an annual income of under \$35,000 do not have an internet subscription, compared to 4% of households with annual income of \$75,000 or more.

We request you give guidance to colleges to assess their students' internet and technology needs and effectively connect them to available resources. We suggest that DHE use your position to convene institutions of higher education and business leaders in Massachusetts to facilitate technology donations or advantageous bulk purchasing agreements to support students who do not have computers at home.

The Massachusetts Education Equity Partnership remains ready to support you, and we welcome the opportunity to be a resource and thought-partner to the DHE and colleges and universities. We sincerely appreciate DHE's continuous efforts to support Massachusetts students through this crisis. Please do not hesitate to reach out to Natasha Ushomirsky at nushomirsky@edtrust.org or 617-816-3589, as well as any of our partners listed below.

With gratitude,

Amplify Latinx
Coaching for Change
Duet
EdNavigator
Educators for Excellence - Boston
He is Me Institute
Higher Ground
Hyde Square Task Force
Immigrant Family Services Institute
Latino Education Institute
Latinos for Education
March Forward Massachusetts - Education Fund
Massachusetts Parents United
Multistate Association for Bilingual Education - Northeast
Strategies for Children
Teach Plus
Teen Empowerment
The Education Trust
The Teachers' Lounge
Thompson Island Outward Bound
uAspire

Urban League of Springfield
Worcester Education Collaborative
YMCA of Greater Boston