

March 11, 2025

Dear Chair Michlewitz,

We, the undersigned organizations, write to extend our sincere gratitude for your ongoing leadership and considerable efforts to expand higher education access and affordability across the Commonwealth. Indeed, your support for initiatives such as MassGrant Plus expansion, tuition equity, MassEducate, and expanding SUCCESS funds to students attending 4-year institutions have been vital to improving higher education access, particularly those from low-income backgrounds, students of color, and first-generation college students. At a time when higher education institutions are facing relentless federal-level attacks and attempts to defund essential student resources and supports, we believe that protecting, sustaining, and growing the state's investments in higher education has never been more critical.

As you plan for the FY26 budget, we would like to offer several recommendations that will help safeguard our recent investments in financial aid and drive significant improvements in degree completion. To achieve this goal, **we strongly support [the Board of Higher Education's recommendation that 25% to 33%](#) of Fair Share funds be dedicated to public higher education** in FY26 and beyond. The surtax is projected to generate \$2.4 billion in revenue—of which \$1.95 billion will be allocated in the FY26 budget. This creates a significant opportunity to strengthen success programs and maximize the impact of existing investments, while leaving ample resources to support other critical initiatives, such as the Governor's FY26 proposal to invest in public higher education capital improvements, an initiative we wholeheartedly support. We believe allocating 25%-33% of Fair Share funds towards higher education is both **[feasible and necessary](#)** to continue building on the progress we have already made and ensure that our efforts to expand access translate into more students obtaining degrees.

### FY26 Recommendations

- 1 **[ASAP/ACE Program Replications: \\$110M to enhance and expand the scope of SUCCESS programs.](#)** We applaud the Governor and Legislature for the recent significant investments made to expand financial aid. Indeed, these investments have resulted in notable increases in enrollment at our public colleges and universities. However, increasing enrollment is only half the battle. If we want to ensure that our financial aid investments are leading to more students obtaining a degree, the state must do more to boost graduation rates by providing essential wraparound services that help support completion.

[Early data](#) show that participation in the programs funded by the SUCCESS line item increases college persistence by as much as 16 percentage points. However, the program currently serves only a fraction of eligible students, and with the recent increases in enrollment, it is essential to grow this funding. Therefore, we recommend allocating \$110M to expand and closely align student support services funded by the SUCCESS program with evidence-based practices, like the [City University of New York's ASAP](#) (Accelerated Study in Associate Programs) program and the [CUNY ACE \(Accelerate, Complete & Engage\) program](#), both of which have demonstrated impressive outcomes in improving graduation rates. The model offers a more comprehensive suite of wraparound support services for low-income students, including academic advising, targeted tutoring, financial aid counseling, and heightened access to on-campus resources. It would offer additional benefits if incorporated into the SUCCESS program moving forward. By expanding the scope of SUCCESS to include the elements reflected in both ASAP and ACE, the Commonwealth can further enhance its efforts to support low-income students and ensure that they have the resources they need to succeed.

- 2 [Increased Basic Needs Support For Pell Students: \\$84M to increase the basic needs stipend for Pell Grant-eligible students at all public higher education institutions.](#)** It is imperative that we continue providing more targeted support to cover the significant remaining unmet needs of students who face the greatest financial challenges if we want to ensure they can persist through to graduation. Pell recipients under MassEducate currently receive a \$1,200 stipend for indirect costs, in addition to a last-dollar tuition/fee-free grant and up to \$1,200 for books and supplies. However, they still face significant unmet financial needs. Research shows this unmet need contributes to their low graduation rates as they struggle to afford basic need costs like that associated with transportation, housing, childcare, and more. This issue similarly affects Pell recipients at State Universities and UMASS campuses, who currently receive only up to \$1,200 for books and supplies under MassGrant Plus Expansion, with no additional support for basic needs. To address this shortfall, streamline benefits across programs, and simplify messaging, we recommend **expanding the combined stipend to \$4,000 for all Pell-eligible students** to more fully cover the substantial indirect costs that we know remain a barrier to access and completion for underserved students. This would benefit 28,200 students and would cost an estimated \$84M. While this would be a step in the right direction, we acknowledge that these amounts still [fall short of covering the full financial challenges](#) faced by students from low-income backgrounds.

As mentioned above, we would also like to express our **strong endorsement of the Governor's proposal to invest in capital infrastructure needs**. This \$125M allocation in FY26 is not only timely but also essential, as it addresses a longstanding backlog of maintenance and modernization requirements within our public higher education institutions. By providing funding for these critical infrastructure projects, we can ensure that our colleges and universities are equipped with state-of-the-art facilities that are conducive to student learning and success in the 21st century.

Equally important, we recognize that public colleges and universities face challenges staffing many high-demand programs because current pay scales are not competitive with private industry. As a result, many students with the requisite skills are not admitted to selective programs like nursing. Students who are accepted into these majors have difficulty completing courses required for graduation, stalling their momentum and placing yet another barrier to graduation in their path. With modest resources, Massachusetts can position institutions to address their most acute staffing needs. In addition to giving students greater access to fields of study that provide upward mobility, this strategic investment is necessary to help the Commonwealth overcome dire workforce shortages in healthcare and other vital sectors.

### Pending Available Funding

We recognize that this is a challenging budget season, especially in light of the changes occurring at the federal level and the threats these drastic changes pose to the Massachusetts economy. We also recognize that there are many competing priorities that you must consider. If Fair Share revenues come in above projections, we urge you to consider these additional investments below:

- 3 Increased Financial Aid For Low-to Moderate-Income Families: \$25 million to further expand MASSGrant Plus.** Currently, the MassGrant Plus Program Expansion covers 100% of tuition and fees for Pell-eligible students and 50% of tuition and fees for low-to-moderate-income students attending the 2-year or 4-year public institution of their choice. We recommend expanding the program to cover 100% of tuition and fees for low-to-moderate-income students whose Student Aid Index (SAI) does not exceed \$15,000 and who continue to face significant financial barriers. This proposed increase in funding will ensure that more students have the option of attending an institution that best meets their unique needs, whether that be a 2-year or 4-year program. This change would benefit approximately 3,200 State University students and 4,300 UMASS students with moderate incomes.

Thank you for considering these recommendations. We believe they represent a forward-thinking, reasonable, and equitable approach to strengthening Massachusetts' higher education system in ways that will ultimately lead to better student outcomes, while also leaving sufficient Fair Share revenue to address other pressing needs in higher education. We welcome the opportunity to discuss these ideas further and look forward to working with you to create a truly affordable and equitable public higher education system for all students in the Commonwealth.

Gratefully,



United Way of  
Massachusetts Bay

