

College Becomes U

State University System Would Enable Mass. Public Campuses to Better Serve Mission

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Since the founding of Framingham Normal School in 1839 as the first state-supported school in the United States for training teachers, Massachusetts state colleges have evolved in response to the changing needs of the regions they serve.

The Massachusetts state Legislature and Gov. Deval Patrick are now considering whether to move from the existing state *college* system to a state *university* system. The state colleges (Bridgewater State, Fitchburg State, Framingham State, Mass College of Art and Design, Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, Massachusetts Maritime Academy, Salem State, Westfield State and Worcester State) have undergone several name changes in their histories—from “normal schools” to “teacher’s colleges” to “state colleges”—to reflect their changing educational roles. Each transition has allowed the colleges to better serve the changing needs of their students, communities and economies. This latest proposed change would similarly enable the colleges to better fulfill their historic mission.

Pending legislation would authorize the boards of trustees of the state colleges to designate their institution as a “university” if it meets the criteria set forth by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, which classifies institutions based on the numbers and types of degrees awarded. (That classification system itself has evolved because, as Andrew McCormick, a senior scholar at the foundation, has remarked, “Institutions change; they are not static entities.”)

This proposed change will align Massachusetts with the rest of the nation, where 45 states have moved to a state university or mixed state university/state college system. Under the Massachusetts proposal, each state college would have the choice of whether to become a university. Some will likely choose to forego university status because of the highly specialized nature of their programs.

The proposal is designed to expand the *system’s* range of degree and program offerings based on changing needs. The state colleges granted 2,190 master’s degrees in 2006, but as state colleges, they are precluded under Massachusetts law from offering doctorates. Making this change at the system level will allow institutions to explore joint programming and avoid redundancies as they develop new graduate-level offerings and affordable doctoral degree programs. Students will enjoy expanded opportunities for professional growth and the chance to work intensively with faculty mentors.

Regional economies also would benefit because as universities, the institutions would be able to offer degrees in fields of high demand where UMass or private universities either do not offer programs or are not meeting regional needs. These could include doctoral degrees in education (especially K-12 and higher education administration), nursing practice and social work.

Salem State College, which already offers bachelor’s and master’s programs in nursing, has conducted regional survey research of nurses and nursing faculty to test demand for more advanced degree programs in the field. In those surveys, 22 percent expressed a strong interest in pursuing a doctorate in nursing, with 57 percent of these indicating they would begin study immediately or within two years if programs were available locally.

Nursing is just one field where pent-up demand and compelling state interest would be served by the transition to a state university system. Graduate programs could serve other areas of critical need, including graphic design, business and management, marine engineering, homeland security, computer science and education.

The university designation will also better position the colleges to compete for students and faculty with interests in advanced study and advanced research.

With state funding of public higher education still below fiscal 2002 levels, it is incumbent on the colleges to leverage other funding sources. There is strong evidence to suggest that university status would considerably strengthen the colleges’ capacity to attract funds from private foundations as well as federal and state government sources. Bridgewater State College found that new student learning initiatives could be expanded if the college became a university, and that, in turn, afforded it greater access to funding from the National Science Foundation, Smithsonian Institution and U.S. Department of Education. Salem State was able to raise \$2.4 million for its Bertolon School of Business when it organized into distinct schools in anticipation of its transition to a university.

While there are significant advantages to the adoption of a state university system, it is important to point out what this change will *not* mean.

The colleges remain committed to their mission as primarily regional teaching institutions. Theoretical research is the domain of the University of Massachusetts; the state colleges have no interest in replicating that mission. However, the colleges are interested in expanding their applied research capacity in support of their regional missions.

Nor will this change lead to a plethora of new degree programs. As universities, the campuses will look to offer doctoral and expanded master's programs only in areas of strong demand. Most of the nation's state universities have retained Carnegie designations as "Masters-I" or "Masters-II" institutions, and offer only a limited number of doctoral degrees. For example, the institutions within the Connecticut State University system offer either a doctorate of education or have no doctoral programs.

The state colleges currently offer Massachusetts students the most affordable path to bachelor's and graduate degrees. They are publicly committed to not placing any additional financial burdens on students as a result of a transition to university status. Tuition and fees at the Connecticut state universities remain comparable to those at the Massachusetts state colleges. The enhanced capacity to attract private and other sources of funding will further relieve pressure on institutional finances.

Similarly, the colleges anticipate that any costs associated with the transition to a state university system can be managed without additional state budget resources. The colleges currently do not use

state funds to support their master's programs, and any future master's and doctoral degree programs would remain self-supporting. Further, the state Legislature already is committed to closing the operational and capital funding gaps facing the colleges, and this funding will cover any other limited costs associated with this change.

When Horace Mann established the precursors of today's Massachusetts state colleges, he saw these institutions as fundamental to the functioning of democracy and to ensuring all citizens equality of opportunity. They still are. But the world of 2007 is a different place. The pace of technological and economic change is unprecedented and the state colleges need the capacity to respond more adroitly to their environment. Today, that need to adapt requires that the colleges be given the authority to become state universities.

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