



Leading into the Future: Challenges and Opportunities A Call to Action

The New England Board of Higher Education calls for the collaborative reinvention of the region’s higher education sector to address the pressing challenges and opportunities our region faces. We must act in four key areas:

- Enhance and expand postsecondary opportunities for adult learners through increased access, affordability, and targeted programs and policies to promote successful completion;
- Develop new cost-saving collaborations to help institutions, systems and states change business models, lower operating costs and contain student tuition and fees;
- Advance PreK-16+ alignment to promote college and career readiness and the successful transition from PreK-12 to postsecondary opportunities and success; and
- Demonstrate the public value of postsecondary education to New England and its residents through expanded advocacy and outreach to key stakeholders.

Just as New England pioneered K-through-12 learning since making “proper” schooling compulsory in the 1640s, our postsecondary institutions—large and small, public and independent, research and teaching have become engines of the cultural, intellectual and economic lives of our towns, states and region.

Today, New England and its higher education institutions stand at an important crossroads of both challenge and opportunity. Profound demographic changes result in marked declines in the number of high school graduates, lowering enrollment of traditional-aged college students and increasing competition for all students. This downward demographic shift will continue for the foreseeable future and accelerate in 2025. Stagnant family incomes, constrained public investment in higher education institutions and student aid, the continued rise in tuition and fees and changing public perceptions of the value of higher education will further compound the competitive and financial sustainability challenges facing our institutions.

At the same time, sectors of New England’s economy continue to experience shortages of middle-skilled and highly skilled workers—and we anticipate that demand for such talent will only expand in coming years. Reflecting the region’s aging population, such shortfalls will soon be aggravated by the increased number of experienced workers nearing retirement; approximately 10,000 baby boomers turn 65 every day, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The continued vitality of the region, the competitiveness of our economies and the long-term strength of our higher education institutions are critically intertwined. Our pipeline from pre-K to 12 and beyond must remain strong, accessible to all and responsive. That will require reaching out to support groups of learners and workers who too often have been underserved. New England higher education institutions must be agile amid changes in their competitive landscape. They are key to meeting our challenge to prepare increased numbers of skilled workers and expand the number of individuals who have both affordable access and success in attaining high-value degrees and credentials. Such opportunities will require institutions to further transform into next-generation, high-quality learning and talent organizations essential to serving new populations of learners and providing relevant, flexible, technology-supported credentials and lifelong learning.

A Call to Action

Recognizing and seeking to build upon, the efforts and leadership of the following critical stakeholders across New England....

We call upon the presidents, trustees, faculty and other leaders of New England higher education institutions to expand their efforts to make realistic assessments of financial sustainability, competitive capacity, enrollment growth prospects and opportunities to address critical talent needs. Our postsecondary institutions must collaborate in unprecedented ways to drive down operating costs and tuition and fee prices and aid institutional transformation, both academic and administrative. We urge them to proactively explore a diverse variety of alliance strategies with other institutions.

We call upon governors, legislators and policymakers in light of both demographic and workforce realities, to further expand incentives and investments in new visions for reducing costs and for transforming postsecondary learning systems and infrastructure—to better reach new learner populations with relevant, flexible, technology-supported lifelong learning and credentials for a dynamic economy. We challenge them to further enhance investments in student affordability and to incentivize multi-institution partnerships and cost-saving initiatives to support institutional sustainability, competitiveness and student outcomes.

We call upon regulators and accreditors to continue to actively review their policies, requirements and processes in light of both quality and institutional sustainability—reducing and eliminating barriers to accelerated institutional experimentation, program and credential innovation and new alliance models. They should proactively support conversations among institutional leaders and stakeholders to facilitate alliance strategies, institutional transformation and talent-focused initiatives.

We call upon employers and business leaders to accelerate their valuable engagement with the public and independent institutions in their communities to address talent shortage and competitiveness challenges, provide support for institutional reinvention and develop next-generation education partnerships by which employers and workers can better access postsecondary and lifelong learning.

We further urge business leaders to leverage their collective voice and influence with government leaders and policymakers to articulate the significant public benefits of postsecondary learning and to advocate for strategic investments and incentives to support growth in innovation, enrollment and attainment.

And we call upon postsecondary students to actively engage in their learning and require that their institutions share in a commitment to advance their employability goals.

As in the past, New England must actively lead the way into the future of higher education and remain a model and world leader. Time and leadership are of the essence.

**This Call to Action
will frame NEBHE's
work during 2019-
2020.**