

Speaker Biographies

Greg Ebner



Dr. Greg Ebner arrived at the Rhode Island Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner (RI OPC) with a broad background in higher education administration. A retired brigadier general of the United States Army, he served on the Academic Board of the United States Military Academy, West Point, where he also led a team of 60 faculty members as the head of the Department of Foreign Languages. Most recently, he taught undergraduate students in the classroom at the University of Rhode Island during the 2022-2023 academic year.

A champion of students and educators alike, Ebner has devoted his academic career to helping all reach their full potential. As Rhode Island explores pathways to develop and sustain a successful workforce in a changing landscape, he remains dedicated to directing efforts to use higher education as a tool to improve the lives of all Rhode Islanders. As Assistant Commissioner, he has direct oversight of the education financial strategy and public investment in postsecondary education to include Rhode Island Reconnect. He is also responsible for budgeting, expenditure control, strategic financial planning, and academic program evaluation within the RI OPC.

Ebner earned his doctorate degree from the University of Texas at Austin and a master's degree from the University of Michigan. He graduated from the Defense Language Institute in California and earned a bachelor's degree in aerospace engineering from the United States Military Academy at West Point.

In addition to teaching at the undergraduate level, Ebner led West Point's department of eight world languages as well as the ESL program for international students where his professional efforts centered on faculty development and student success across multiple pillars. Additionally, he orchestrated lasting academic institutional governing efforts and served on the undergraduate admissions committee.

Dr. Ebner is joined at the March 11, 2024, Legislative Advisory Committee meeting by Omar Reyes, Director of Adult Programs & Policies at RI OPC.

Jack Mills



As Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer for the Council of Adult and Experiential Education (CAEL), Jack Mills leads alignment of the organization's work, resource development, and budget with its vision and Theory of Change, so that all adults have an equitable opportunity for and success in obtaining credentials and skills that lead to well-paying, good quality jobs, increased earnings and economic mobility, and improved quality of life.

A membership organization, in 2023 CAEL and its 1,185 partners, including 766 post-secondary institutions, collaborated to reach nearly 1.3 million adult learners and to expand use of credit for prior learning, activate adult learners' voices, improve career knowledge, and increase enrollment in post-secondary institutions and other skill development programs. Mills says, "I am passionate about CAEL because of our impact: we benefit people and employers, and center equity in doing so. We thereby strengthen regional and national economic vitality. And by doing so we support and sustain our democracy."

Nationally recognized in workforce development, Mills previously has served in leadership roles for national nonprofits, workforce development organizations, and government. He has brought together industry partnerships in healthcare, information technology, and six other industries, and directed a national network of industry partnerships, expanding them 500 percent to over 1,000 nationwide by advancing strategies and policy. Mills holds a Master of Public Administration in Workforce Development and Economic Development as well as a bachelor's degree in social anthropology from Harvard University.

Noe Ortega



Noe Ortega most recently served as Secretary of Education for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, a position he held since the fall of 2020. Prior to accepting his appointment as secretary, Dr. Ortega held the role of Deputy Secretary and Commissioner for the Office of Postsecondary and Higher Education (OPHE) at the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE). As commissioner, he led the work of the agency aimed at closing the postsecondary attainment gaps that have persisted among historically underrepresented populations and communities of color in Pennsylvania. Additionally, Dr. Ortega facilitated the efforts of the department to improve the diversity of Pennsylvania's educator workforce and to ensure that every student of the Commonwealth has access to educators who have been trained in culturally responsive and culturally relevant approaches to teaching and learning in the classroom.

Prior to joining PDE, Dr. Ortega spent eight years at the University of Michigan, where he held several academic and administrative roles. During his tenure he worked as the Assistant Director and Senior Research Associate at the National Center for Institutional Diversity and as the Managing Director for the National Forum on Higher Education for the Public Good. While most of his research has focused on postsecondary access and success for historically underserved students, his most recent publications examine how public investment in higher education influences decision-making at colleges and universities. Additionally, Dr. Ortega spent nearly a decade working in the areas of financial aid and enrollment management at both public and private universities in Texas, and he also served as a P-16 Specialist for the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB). Dr. Ortega also spent nearly seven years as director of a language institute in Japan where he trained teachers in the area of early childhood language acquisition.

Dr. Ortega received a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science from St. Edwards University, a Master of Science in School Counseling from Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, and his Ph.D. in Higher Education Policy from the University of Michigan.

Commissioner Ortega is joined at the March 11, 2024, Legislative Advisory Committee meeting by Dr. Jose Luis Santos, Senior Deputy Commissioner, and Michael Dannenberg, Deputy Commissioner for Policy, both of the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education.

Joanne Pokaski

Joanne Pokaski is the Assistant Vice President of Workforce Planning and Development at the Beth Israel Lahey Health system (BILH), the second largest private employer in Massachusetts with about 38,000 employees. Her team sponsors employees' training and promotion to hard-to-fill roles, supports all BILH employees in their career development, and partners with community organizations to connect community members to jobs and careers at BILH.

Pokaski is the Chair of the Massachusetts Workforce Board and a member of Boston's Workforce Board. She also serves on the board of the National Fund for Workforce Solutions. She founded and, for seven years, chaired the Boston Healthcare Careers Consortium, which convenes Boston's healthcare employers, academic institutions, and workforce system to improve training pathways that lead to healthcare jobs. She was a founding member and, for three years, chaired the executive committee of CareerSTAT, an initiative of the National Fund for Workforce Solutions encouraging more U.S. healthcare employers to invest in frontline workers.

Prior to her current role, Pokaski served as Senior Director of Workforce Development and Community Relations at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center (BIDMC). Prior to BIDMC, she served as director of Boston Career Link, a one-stop career center in Boston. She has also worked at the Boston Redevelopment Authority, the Clinton White House and as Special Assistant to the Administrator of the Medicare and Medicaid programs during the Clinton Administration.

Pokaski earned a Bachelor's degree in Government from Harvard College and a master's degree in Public Affairs from Princeton University.