

Massachusetts Commission on Digital Innovation & Lifelong Learning

Meeting Minutes | September 25, 2018

The following Commission members were present and constituted a quorum of the Commission:

J.D. LaRock (chair), Rosalin Acosta, David Cedrone (designee for Commissioner Carlos Santiago), Joanna Dowling, Jean Eddy, Joe Fuller, Chris Gabrieli, Michael Horn, Don Kilburn, Patricia Meservey, Reinier Moquete, James Peyser, Marjorie Ringrose, Adrian Servetnick (designee for Commissioner Juan Vega), Sanjay Sarma, Mary Sarris, Michelle Weise.

By remote access (telephone): Jennifer Davis-Carey, Oz Mondejar

The following Commission members were absent: Linda Boff, Susan Cicco, Jean Eddy, Laurie Leshin, Michael London, Christina Royal

Call to Order – A regular meeting of the Commission on Digital Innovation & Lifelong Learning was held on Tuesday, September 25, 2018, at the headquarters of Commonwealth Corporation, 2 Oliver Street, Fifth Floor Conference Room.

Agenda Item – Approval of Minutes. The first agenda item concerned approval of minutes from the May 22, 2018, and June 26, 2018, meeting of the Commission, and the July 21, 2018, and August 28, 2018, meeting of the committees of the Commission. Sanjay Sarma moved to approve the minutes for each of these meetings, and Joe Fuller seconded the motion. All members of the Commission voted in favor.

Agenda Item – Discussion of draft report of the Commission. The remainder of the meeting consisted of a discussion and feedback by members of the Commission regarding the draft final report of the Commission.

- Reinier Moquete: Has a positive review of the draft, and found that it included good treatment of the realities that face the Latino population. Query: How does the discussion of targeted learners translate into funding if we want to open up access to those communities? If funding is made available, how does the Commission or others at the state level track success in ensuring access and equity of outcome for all learners in the long run?
- Chris Gabrieli: The section on challenges tends to cast technology as a challenge because of how technology change is having an impact on job change, the need for higher skills, and a much more complex economy. Technology development it is also a positive and represents a real opportunity when it is viewed as expanding the mechanisms for learning new skills. Recommend that the report should include a new section that promotes technology in this manner.
- Rosalin Acosta: Recently participated at a forum at the National Science Foundation that was designed to ensure the development of a diverse workforce well prepared for careers in computing-related and computationally-intensive fields. The session reviewed, among other topics, issues of

workforce credentialing and the inability of higher education to rise to the challenge to meet continuous workforce changes. There was a lot of overlap between the NSF forum and the issues that have been part of the work of the Commission. The draft report framed the issues well. However the scale and speed of change makes this field especially important and needs to be emphasized more in the final draft.

- James Peyser: The draft report frames the overall challenge in a very effective way. We must also acknowledge that it is going to take more than just the report to keep these issues at the forefront for both the professional public as well as the general public.
- Patricia Meservey: Agrees with the points made by Rosalin Acosta. A lot of the problem we are having is the disconnect we have in understanding the role of higher education and how it supports a rapidly changing economy. Who is the 'student' in higher education? Our reality is that the 'traditional' student (aged 18 – 21, attending a college full-time) has NOT been the typical student for a long time. This traditional image still exists in most people minds. In reality, the spectrum of learners reflects different ethnicities, different ages, different family structures, and different motivations for attending higher education. The high education community tends to lag behind in acknowledging change in the nature of our students and in the content we are deliver when we are educating. It takes a long time to undergo change in higher education, but the economy and society are changing at a much faster pace. A sense of urgency in our public policy is essential. Faculty are disconnected from the economic and social environment and are not always in tune with the real world because they have not been present during a period of rapid changes. Higher education can't really help prepare students for jobs because of an underlying disconnect with employer realities.

The draft report, like other literature in this space, recognizes the value of having a liberal arts education, since it appears to help learners develop self-capacities. That said, we need to start giving higher education community the message that learning for the workforce has an equal priority and purpose.

- James Peyser: Query whether financial incentives might be enough to get higher education to change or whether the underlying issue is one of culture and institutional inertia?
- Patricia Meservey: The biggest barrier to change is the culture of the institutions themselves. We may need to create whole new institutions or at the very least use incentives for those who position themselves to change faster.
- Rosalin Acosta: It is still very important to have liberal arts in addition to technical skills. The combination of approaches helps workers achieve more. Employers are looking for broader capacities than just technical production.
- J.D. LaRock: One of the themes we tried to include is the need to create a new suite of micro credentials that respond to workforce needs yet still show how those stack into a bachelor's degree, which is our approach to honoring the need for a liberal arts education. Have we managed to strike that careful balance?

Sanjay: There appear to be two dimensions to this issue of higher education. First is the need to support graduates so they have more concrete ways of getting into the labor market through the award of

realistic credentials. Second, the recognition is that higher education itself is a large segment of our economy, and that transformation of higher education is necessary to help keep our lead from the perspective of the industry as an employment base.

- Don: Listening to the conversation helps us recognize that there are many different kinds of students and learners. Issues of access and affordability are critical to most segments of learners. A significant percentage of learners are focused on what it takes to get the next job, not necessarily on getting a long term degree.
- Peyser: Recommend that you consider developing profiles of a diversity of real people to demonstrate different learners who are in different settings. That might drive the point home that there is a large and diverse market of learners. Need to segment the market and show which ones we have incorporated as focus.
- Michelle Weiss: Need to talk about lifelong learning at a more granular level (e.g., profiles) . . . as we think about a lifelong learning system, focus on need for upskilling. This is a hard concept to 'sell' because there may be little motivation for participating in training or upskilling. Remember that nobody *wants* to go back to school; that sounds like a deficit model. We need to be more deliberate how to frame this so it is an advancement system. We need to avoid so we don't just fall into trap of touting the need for more school.
- Mary Sarris: There is a dramatic imbalance in the ages and size of our population compared to the age and size of our workforce. For example, the younger youth cohort is quite small relative to older workers who are retiring from employment. Historically, the size of the elder population was always smaller than the cohort of youth who were coming in to the overall population. Our state's age demographic tells us that there is a growing problem in finding people to take the place of the older worker cohort. This dynamic makes the youth cohort much more important and we should emphasize this more in the language of our report. We need to articulate both the upskilling of existing adults as well as be more efficient in establishing a pipeline for youth. There is no question that what appears now to be a learner gap will eventually develop into a worker gap.
- J.D. LaRock: Draft places a lot of emphasis on the higher education system, but question whether there is enough content and focus on the workforce development system.
- Joe Fuller: That is a legitimate concern and it would be good to address it. I'd also like the next draft to be more explicit about the implications of digital innovation. There are a lot of very familiar themes that include workforce demographics or the problems with higher education. The learning market has segmented – incumbent workers, nontraditional learners, etc. There are many different groups that need more realistic access to training and education. Have we may have overemphasized a more conventional tradition but we might want to consider how digital innovation allows us to address some of the barriers that currently limit different populations of learners in different ways. We should find ways to use this as a device to tease out these segments. You could read this report and come away with the idea that digital learning is going to supplement higher education, that it is going to expand higher education, or that it is going to displace some of the traditional mechanisms of higher education. In fact, it is all the above and your perspective changes depending on which constituency you choose to look at.

When we start talking about workforce boards, we need to understand that the most logical connection between an employer and a worker who is no longer in the education system is actually the workforce board. Digital innovation is too much in the background of the draft. The current workforce system does what it does pretty well. It is not designed to meet the needs that are coming our way. Digital innovation helps us bridge this gap, and those benefits need to be highlighted more.

- Sanjay Sarma: One of the observations we have is the fact that few people know if any credentials really have any market value. This big concern is partially addressed by micro credentials.
- Renier Moquete: Need to highlight ROI for businesses as a positive return on investment in skills and people. This isn't just about robotics and change in jobs – there is an economic imperative and a very tangible return on investment to private industry on why this needs to happen. It makes sense to think about incentivizing the private sector to be a part of this workforce skill effort. The private sector is both going to save a lot of money and make a lot of money as the result of digital innovation in learning. The report should put this front and center – private business are benefiting here. Use this as an incentive to encourage business to be a bigger part of funding skill formation.
- Joseph Fuller: The majority of employers are highly skeptical of ROI on training. We need to see that this report is part of the larger effort of educating employers about the positive benefits of investing in their own workforce.
- Michael London: The sources of friction that we are solving are not totally clear. For example, if ROI was positive why doesn't the market already recognize this and respond? I think there is a need to increase the level of friction in the recommendations so it is more clear what problems we are trying to solve.
- Joanna: I see a need to have additional focus on middle management as a core target. The options that we already have can deliver the lower level technical training, but we need to support the delivery of advanced and soft skills so that machinists are able to grow into middle management options (including first line supervisors)

Feedback on recommendations related to system actor, virtual academy, and community-based organization components.

- Michelle Weiss: Given our priority learner populations, the report needs to highlight how a digital platform give rise to the existence of expanded opportunity AND helps support the need for coordinating entity. This is not just a marginal way to do work in a better way, but a fundamental re-thinking of learning.
- JD LaRock: Based on today's discussion, we really need to differentiate recommendations related to the higher education system from those focused on the workforce development system. We especially need to show how different learners benefit from the different new digital approaches.
- Michael London: Need to incent higher education to develop skill standards and current needs.
- Pat Meservey: Higher education institutions and vocational high schools are very slow to move in this arena. Even high schools within the k-12 system are slow to adapt. It is hard to grow something new

out of existing institutions, and perhaps this is the most important reason that we need to start by creating something new.

- Joe Fuller: We need to ensure that each of the recommendations speak to the barriers that are presently limiting learners. I also recommend that we describe the term “catalyst” better, and we need more language about keeping Massachusetts at the forefront of high education leadership.
- Jim Peyser: The report can be strengthened if we keep Massachusetts at the front of higher education evolution. There is a real need in this state for a systems coordinator – to create more thought leadership, coordination, and identification of opportunities. There is need for more intellectual guidance in this grouping and not just a simple handoff to new entity.

We need to emphasize the multiplicity of digital models – there is not just one monolithic program model. Instead, digital innovation allows the networking of several Instructional models. This is part of a generative process, not a single approach to learning. Need to state this as a framework for the continued development within this space rather than just a new entity that will implement a narrow set of approaches.

The Virtual Academy is the big idea, and that alone would be a major accomplishment even if nothing else were implemented. That said, we need to emphasize a few smaller things like (a) prior learning assessment needs to be knit together into a common approach that works for many institutions if it is expected to be taken to larger scale; (b) degree completion and solutions that are available to us for adults who already have some college credits; and (c) ease of information to offer support to wider set of growing elements.

- Marjorie Ringrose: The draft would be better if we could demonstrate what lifelong learning really means.