

Massachusetts Commission on Digital Innovation & Lifelong Learning

Meeting Minutes | October 30, 2018

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

J.D. LaRock (chair), David Cedrone (designee for Commissioner Carlos Santiago), Joanna Dowling, Jean Eddy, Joe Fuller, Chris Gabrieli, Don Kilburn, Michael London, Oz Mondejar, Reinier Moquete, Marjorie Ringrose, Christina Royal, Sanjay Sarma, Mary Sarris, Juan Vega, Michelle Weise.

By remote access (telephone): Jennifer Davis-Carey, Pat Meservey

Absent: Linda Boff, Susan Cicco, Laurie Leshin, James Peyser.

Call to Order – A regular meeting of the Commission on Digital Innovation & Lifelong Learning was held on Tuesday, October 30, 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 September 25, 2018, meeting of the Commission. Sanjay Sarma moved to approve the minutes for this meeting, 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.

Discussion of Recommendation 1 – Lifelong Learning ‘Eco-system Enabler’. This recommended organization is being modeled after the approach the Commonwealth accomplished when it created the Massachusetts STEM Council. This ‘big tent’ construct will be helpful to set up an enabling entity.

- **Mary Sarris:** Recommends that we insert language into the final report that supports coordination between the Enabler (entity) and regional/local partners who are already in place and working at the local and programmatic level.
- **Joe Fuller:** When it comes time to design a specific approach, it might be helpful to look at the structure of the Business Experiential-Learning Commission in Colorado and identify language and functions that would be helpful for chartering this new entity.
- **Sanjay Sarma:** Our report identifies a wide variety of functions that the proposed entity must serve. One of the primary ones is *convening*. Others have to do with *content* and taxonomy, Another major function is *grantmaking*. Suggest that the range of functions be grouped under larger headings. Also, note that most of these activities are not actually similar, and it is pretty rare to find any such entity in any state that set up with an expectation to perform them all.
- **Juan Vega:** Work that has already been accomplished through the regional blueprint process has brought together many partners – across regional planning agencies, regional economic development, and regional workforce boards. The structure at the regional level is already in

place, and we should use language to make sure our proposed entity connects with these and doesn't try to supplant it.

- **Michele Weise:** One of the challenges that the entity will face is how to get the right mix of entrepreneurs and new educational technology platforms present. There may be built-in intermediaries – like venture funds – who would be very effective in helping identify some of the new approaches that is creating new capacity for learning.
- **Joanne Dowling:** Trade industry associations are also helpful, especially because they link to the regional credentialing bodies. Associations have relationships with key employers that will be essential to making the new system work.
- **Oz Mondejar:** We are now participating in a new approach that has been sponsored by the Department of Labor involving the development of Information Technology apprenticeship programs, especially those focused on cybersecurity. These new approaches are beginning to represent new connections that have not existed before, and represent a new capacity that it would be helpful to relate with.
- **Michael London:** Stated that he would be able to serve as a helpful connector to the emerging field of new educational technology entrepreneurs.
- **Michele Weise:** On the recommendation regarding holding an annual national educational technology conference, many of these already happening and we may not want to add to the mix. Recommends that we partner with existing organizations and not try to convene our own.
- **Joe Fuller:** Add real-time labor market information as one of the key functions of the new entity. Proposes that access to LMI might be used as an incentive for potential program partners to agree to join the effort – that participating in a challenge grant procurement or receipt of a challenge grant award might be a vehicle for these partners to have priority access to real time LMI. Also, this entity will need to build and maintain current awareness and knowledge of similar programs and models, both domestic and foreign (especially European) and able to adapt these ideas and concepts to new partners here in Massachusetts.
- **J.D. LaRock:** Comments that there appears to be strong interest expressed in this discussion in emphasizing the educational technology / ed-tech entrepreneur field.
- **Chris Gabrieli:** One of the benefits of the STEM Council work is the branding and clarity that has happened regarding the term 'STEM'. Our enabler needs to be able to represent the concept of lifelong learning within the environment of larger systems. This field needs some strong, highly visible, focused terminology that will help clarify and expand support.
- **Joe Fuller:** Voiced agreement with the need for clarity and branding. We already know a lot of approaches that help young people get access to the labor market, things like career pathways and other approaches. It appears that other targeted populations of learners, like displaced workers, juvenile justice youth, and people who have earned some college credits but not a degree, are segments of the larger market of learners who do not necessarily want to go back to school and still have lots of baggage and face barriers to their learning and credentialing. A lot of opportunity and need exists in reaching out to these specialized segments with some language

that helps them learn about these new lifelong learning platforms. If we can articulate a clear market, make learning practical and accessible, and bring in these more disaffected cohorts. It would constitute a great success.

- **Oz Mondejar:** Still necessary to find an approach that defines the practical applicability of lifelong learning for the employer. We need to take the right steps so that employers see the value of investment in continuous learning and makes such investment a regular part of the budget of the organization.
- **Christina Royal:** Lifelong learning is a broad label. Just like what took place in the STEM field, this entity will need to prioritize the four legs of lifelong learning and begin to brand them so that there is an overall umbrella term but there is also something very clear to users as well as delivery partners.
- **Marjorie Ringrose:** Is there a role for the enabler in developing infrastructure – for example, a website, or the creation of a “transcript warehouse”?
- **J.D. LaRock:** Those ideas are not off the table but have not been developed to date; those examples would constitute part of an as-yet undefined body of work.
- **Marjorie Ringrose:** It would be useful, in thinking about how to define this entity, to consider practical operational details from the perspective of different users. If you were laid off from a job, how do you know where to go to find information and access? What are the steps that you take to learn about your options?
- **Mary Sarris:** The one-stop career system (MassHire) is the place to find the information. These centers are the place where most people should start. This system is designed to help people access resources, access workshops, access the re-employment ecosystem, and access information. It is a rich mix of functions, even though we know that people who go there simply say “I just want a job”.
- **Reinier Moquete:** MassHire should be a place where people go BUT that requires someone to walk in to a brick and mortar location. Need to have a digital platform so users can access these services and information on-line. Still a lot of work that needs to be done to make it accessible and universal.
- **Michele Weise:** Agrees that a high priority need is to develop a regular online, virtual infrastructure so learners can quickly understand what options are available.
- **Christina Royal:** Reminder that there is a significant continuing digital divide within the population. For many constituents, their first instinct will not be to get online and seek information about skills, jobs, and training programs.
- **Joanna Dowling:** A high percentage of the population she is targeting with her training capacity lacks both English proficiency and digital skills.
- **Reinier Moquete:** Recommends that we figure out how we get users up to speed. How, as part of this effort, do we include a component of digital literacy so that we are expanding the population of persons who are currently underserved but learn how and access this new system?

- **Christina Royal:** Reducing the digital divide will not only help people access online information about learning options, but this will also be critical regarding the ability of users to be successful learners and be able to complete online learning.
- **Don Kilburn:** There is a lot of operational discussion today that may not need to be addressed within the recommendations or in the report. But there is a strong belief that the system entity will be responsible for a multi-layered marketing approach – will need to organize different market segments (both learners and employers) and target a marketing effort to each one.
- **J.D. LaRock:** Recognizes the voice of the Commission members is that our report needs to support the larger effort to bridge an existing digital divide, that we can succeed if there is a practical access point for digital learning options. The state is currently developing the Mass Development Counts portal. This is a beginning, rudimentary effort to create a portal, and we need to build on the experience of creating it.

Discussion of Recommendation 2 – Challenge Grant Program. In general, one of the elements of the final recommendations is the plan to roll out a network of program grants in the near future. Necessarily, any RFP or procurement process will need to reference the regional skills blueprints in terms of defining strategic priorities and targeting digital innovations to occupations that are identified as being in demand. The network of grants will also involve a broad array of educational providers – public and private institutions of higher learning, as well as training providers, and new organizations who are emerging within the online education and training space. We also believe that a consortium model is most appropriate, and expect that applications would be entertained only when they reflect multiple partners. Finally, we note in the draft report that the Health Care Skills Collaborative model is very helpful as a guide to how some of the specific products will be developed – the HCSC is a mechanism that could serve as a ‘sub-board’ to the lifelong learning entity, specializing on health care program elements.

- **Reinier Moquete:** Wrap-around services are critical to support outcomes with underserved communities. We should be clear that any challenge grant process will require plans to address learner supports. Also, in terms of marketing, how are we connecting with the underserved communities? There has been very little direct engagement with the segment of learners who have been bid out or excluded. We should coordinate with the recent Black Advisory Commission and the Latino Advisory Commission and identify specific connections for both Latino and African American learners.
- **Michelle Weise:** Need to make sure that applications to receive challenge grant funding are solid and real and not just rhetorical and on paper. In addition, it might be useful to award grant to develop specialized tools or to see what is out there and document the ability of a certain platform or approach to deliver services – identify tools that would make LLL programs more effective.
- **Reinier Moquete:** It might be useful to think of the entity and its approach to awarding a challenge grant as a platform that could act like an ‘application program interface’ (API) does in the IT field – a set of routines, protocols, and tools for building software applications; an API specifies how software components should interact.

- **David Cedrone:** Two points to make: (a) recognize that the MassHire career centers generally focus on face-to-face processes and we need to figure out a way to convert these to on-line services; (b) larger concern with this discussion about challenge grants – grantmaking will inevitably be central to the delivery by the management entity (the ‘enabler’) but worry that the promise of a new system will be missed if all we accomplish is to award grants.
- **J.D. LaRock:** The momentum built up by this Commission needs to result in something that can be executed fairly quickly in order to keep momentum. Even if the administration accepts the report and approach, implementation would depend on obtaining a budget appropriation, which means it will take two years to get funding out. Need to focus both on realities of program timing and delivery AND think about the strategy at a higher level.

Responses to stylized graphic of the proposed virtual system:

- **Joe Fuller:** This is a very tangible manifestation of a practical approach. Would appreciate similar attention to an equivalent in how to embed work-based learning or work experience within this model.
- **David Cedrone:** Interested in the recommendations include an assessment of how existing programs (grants and funding streams) and figure out how to move them to the digital approach in order to make implementation of these services better / faster / more accessible.
- **Joanna Dowling:** Wrap-around supports are the most critical program element but often is the first thing to get cut when there is a need to replicate a program faster.
- **J.D. LaRock:** Our operating assumption has been that that digitally-enabled delivery is a solution to part of the system. It is not a panacea for every issue that we will confront. One reality is that we don’t really know how to scale up one program that worked well. The Partners / SNHU program clearly worked well and served many learners. What is the best process for scaling this up quickly?
- **Chris Gabrieli:** What do you put in the report that gets decided and what do you save for delivery by the entity? The idea of a challenge grant program might get more partners to apply, but we also need to give direction to the field in order to enhance the direction that people are heading. How do we best catalyze the entire field?
- **Reinier Moquete:** Make sure that you use language in the final report that is a lot more specific in ensuring that this lifelong learning system is not going to simply keep funding the status quo. We have an opportunity to excite learners by promoting more expectation of innovation.
- **Michelle Weise:** When we actually conduct the challenge grant competition, each applicant needs to demonstrate the contents that are listed in the enabler box (e.g., competency-based learning, credentials, employer co-sponsored, etc.). We need to use language that shows we expect provider proposals to show they incorporated this approach.
- **Christina Royal:** Need to strengthen the language about equity. Recommend that staff look at the recommendations of the recent reports from the governor’s Latina and African commissions to see the direction they are taking and both reference and incorporate this direction in the commission report.

Discussion of Recommendation 4 – Sources of Funding and Support

This discussion was cut short by lack of time at the commission meeting. Two quick points that were made include:

- **Joe Fuller:** Would be a great idea to look at a recent initiative funded by the Walmart Foundation that is trying to figure out how Prior Learning Assessment would interact with for employer training – both to see how much credit could be used to reduce the amount of time spent in employer-sponsored training programs AND to determine how skills learned at employer training can be recognized in other education or degree programs.
- **Mary Sarris:** The Commonwealth of Massachusetts recently adopted a tax credit approach to support participation and delivery of apprenticeship. How does that work? Is there a way to inject any of the Commission work into this process so that employers have a tax credit available for work experience that is delivered as a part of a digital learning program?