*****Massachusetts Department of***

***Elementary and Secondary Education***

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| Jeffrey C. Riley  *Commissioner* |  |

# MEMORANDUM

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| **To:** | Members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education |
| **From:** | Jeffrey C. Riley, Commissioner |
| **Date:** | January 15, 2021 |
| **Subject:** | Update on College Access Data for the Class of 2021 |

In October 2020, the Board of Higher Education (BHE) reported data on student enrollment in public higher education institutions. Due in large part to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Massachusetts public higher education system experienced its largest single-year decrease in fall undergraduate enrollment since statewide systematic data collection efforts began in the late 1990s: -7%. This decline, however, was not distributed equally among the various segments of higher education institutions. Enrollment at the University of Massachusetts (UMass) campuses was flat compared to previous years. The overall statewide decline was driven mostly by steep drops in enrollment in the community college segment (-11.6%) and in the state university segment (-7.7%). Focusing just on first-time degree seekers, like those who graduated from high school in the spring of 2020, these enrollment declines are even more precipitous. Declines were steepest for lower income students and students of color.

Looking ahead to the graduating class of 2021, the early data point to similar potential drops in college enrollment this fall. Given this concerning trend, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) has been working with the Department of Higher Education (DHE) and a few higher education research partners since early fall 2020, in an effort to prevent gaps in college-going among this year’s high school graduates.

One key leading indicator of a high school senior’s interest in going to college is the completion of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). DESE and DHE have long been sharing FAFSA data, which we use to populate reports that enable high school principals, guidance counselors, and other staff who work with high school seniors see how they are progressing and promote FAFSA completion as necessary. The FAFSA completion rates as of November 2020 are down sharply compared to the previous year: nationally, the rate is down by about 16% compared to 2019, and in Massachusetts, the rate is down by 18%. In Massachusetts high schools that enroll the most low-income students of color, the rate is down by 25%.

DESE has engaged with high school counselors and college access experts across Massachusetts to better understand the challenges they are facing during the pandemic, as well as promising practices that could be shared, and potentially scaled up, across the state. At the January 26 Board meeting, DESE staff will discuss the efforts underway to get ahead of the college-going gap of 2021.