

STATE BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION SELF ASSESSMENT

May 2026

The State Board of Higher Education (“SBHE”) was established in 2024 “to provide direction, coordination and support to ensure that institutions of higher education fully meet the workforce and economic development needs of this Commonwealth and ensure that all residents of this Commonwealth have access to affordable, world-class postsecondary education.”

At the time that its first annual report is released, the SBHE is required to provide a self-review and make recommendations regarding the efficacy of the structure and operation of the Board. To that end, Board members offered feedback via an anonymous survey in May 2026. The survey yielded 13 responses.

Summary findings from the survey include:

- The strategic plan, the governance structure and data dashboards were cited as the Board’s greatest accomplishments to date.
- The diversity of Board perspectives was perceived as an important strength, and the quality and effectiveness of the staff were noted. There was a desire to delegate more to the staff, and a suggestion that the Board needs more staff capacity to accomplish its ambitious aims.
- Strategic plan implementation, transfer of authority, and economic and workforce development goals were identified as specific areas for future focus.
- Most Board members felt that the Board meets too frequently, and that public meetings be more content focused as the Board moves into its next phase of work.

More specific responses to survey items are provided below.

OVERALL BOARD EFFECTIVENESS

The Board provided its highest rating for its mission-aligned achievements (4.83 on a 5-point scale).

Board members commended the Board’s strong governance structure, the adoption of its strategic plan, and the creation of data dashboards that will provide the public with transparent information on the higher education sector.

BOARD FUNCTIONING

Board members rated the board as highly functional (4.6 on a 5-point scale).

They cited the importance of the diversity of viewpoints and perspectives of Board members, as well as its consistent engagement in the work of the Board. Specific feedback included:

“Board members are very engaged in committee work each bringing unique work and life experiences.”

“Committees and advisory councils correspond to SBHE mission and priorities.”

BOARD GOVERNANCE AND STAFFING

Board members perceive the governance structure and staffing to be highly effective (Average 4.75 on a 5-point scale).

Several praised the quickness with which bylaws and committees were established, and noted the connection between strong governance, strong staffing, and the Board’s achievements to date. Others noted that the Board should continue to assess its structure and functions as the Board matures. Comments included:

“I find this set up, and the leadership and staff, very effective.”

“The SBHE has accomplished all of the essentials to stand up a Board (in a remarkably short period of time). The professional staff is of the highest quality. Almost all of the Board members have rolled up their sleeves and partaken in the work of standing up the Board and of meeting its duties and responsibilities.”

“Now that the Board has adopted an ambitious strategic plan, we have a lot of work ahead of us. Board staff have done an amazing job of supporting us to get to this point. But to meet our goals, we need more capacity—and by that I mean more Board staff. The current team of four or five staff members have done a tremendous amount of work, however it is not realistic for a such a small team to implement an ambitious plan that will move an entire sector.”

“The governance structure has been very effective thus far, as evidenced by what the Board has been able to accomplish. As we move from “start-up” mode to regular operating structure, we’ll need to evaluate the new structure and its effectiveness.”

BOARD COMPOSITION

Board members suggested that the diversity of perspectives represented on the Board is a strength and should be expanded.

As Board seats turn over, members noted the importance of including strong voices from the community college, employer, workforce, and economic development sectors in particular. Suggestions included:

“We should include industry leaders that represent a large segment of the Commonwealth. Perhaps in addition to localized industry.”

“Most important--prospective board members should be passionate about the work and about higher education and economic prosperity of the commonwealth. They should have the time and inclination to continue to be “working board members.” They should be open-minded and willing to listen to other perspectives (and possibly have their minds changed).”

“It would be interesting to have representation from someone who is focused on the finance structure of higher education.”

“Someone from an Economic and Workforce Development entity; someone from K-12 to understand how students make decisions about Higher Education.”

“Board membership and composition should be assessed annually based on the progress toward meeting legislative requirements and strategic goals. Perhaps someone with a specific economic development perspective, especially for our rural areas (such as county commissioners or local government).”

“Additional community college representation since the sector is the only sector under the SBHE.”

BOARD PRIORITIES

When asked what the Board should focus on in the months and years ahead, comments affirmed that Board priorities are appropriate and on target.

Several members noted that the strategic plan provides the right direction and priorities for the Board’s work. Others called for increased attention to the workforce development role of higher education and the need for stronger connections to employers. One Board member directly called for increased authority for the Board, and another for increasing the ranking of Pennsylvania’s higher education sector. Specific comments included:

“Continuing to focus on career pathways and training programs through higher education programming should remain a priority. In particular, the Board should help traditional four-year universities find ways to provide credential-based training programs of shorter duration to meet the workforce needs of their communities. Encouraging robust local employer engagement should also be encouraged.”

“Please prioritize a policy review to move all higher ed sectors under one leadership.”

“Our focus should be exactly what it currently prioritized (e.g., transfer of authority; data dashboards; strategic plan goals).”

“Implementation of the plan as well as regular updates or monitoring of state and federal program changes or challenges.”

“A clear path forward in how PA can go from the bottom 49 out of 50 in direct funding to a more competitive dollar amount within the top 40.”

EFFECTIVENESS OF BOARD MEETINGS

The Board provided its lowest ranking on the effectiveness of public Board meetings (4.33 on a 5-point scale). 11 of 13 respondents noted that the Board meets more frequently than it needs to.

While most said that the meetings are either somewhat or very effective, many suggested that meetings should be less frequent in the future, as well as more predictable, noting the importance of committees as a space to move Board work forward. Others commented that public meeting agendas should be more robust, and that votes are not needed to grant permission for the mission-aligned work of the staff. Specific suggestions included:

“The board should start to move into a phase where it does not need to approve (by vote) direction to move forward on projects such as data dashboards and the strategic plan for higher education.”

“Some of the public meetings have agendas that are not as robust as they could be (in terms of action items needing votes or board education about important topics). Committee meetings tend to be where the real work gets done.”

“More frequent committee meetings and less frequent board meetings (can augment with communication updates).”

“Public meetings probably are a little too frequent given actual action items needing discussion and voting. This made sense during the past 18 months when the board was being formed, and it was imperative to have a consensus of the board on working items. Hopefully we're getting to a point (after this summer) when more directional decisions can be made by staff/board leadership (including the Executive Committee).”