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Public college stature is key, group says

Boston Business Journal - by [Mary Moore](#)

Education and business leaders who see the public higher education system as an essential factor in the state's economic growth are mounting a long-term campaign to measure Bay State schools against peers nationwide and increase financial support for them at home.

The heads of all 29 public university campuses — 15 community colleges, nine state colleges and the entire UMass system — have signed on to the Vision Project, an initiative led by Richard Freeland, the state commissioner of higher education and a former president of **Northeastern University**.

Historically, Freeland said in an interview, the state's public universities have lived in "the shadow" of renowned private institutions such as **Harvard University** and the **Massachusetts Institute of Technology**.

If the state is to compete economically, he said, executives siting their businesses will look also for a strong interest in workforce development among public school leaders.

To bring that about, Freeland said, he and his collaborators want to "change a pattern of under-support and underappreciation" of the public system.

He points to national research published by **Illinois State University** that shows Massachusetts ranking at the top nationally in funding cuts for public higher education over five years, even as the state has increased spending on K-12 to prepare students for college. Yet, the high school graduates most likely to make their homes in Massachusetts are those who go on to attend the state's public colleges and universities, said Susan Houston, executive director of the **Massachusetts Alliance for Economic Development**.

"It's becoming more difficult to keep graduates of private higher education in Massachusetts because they have so many choices," said Alan Macdonald, executive director of the **Massachusetts Business Roundtable**. Macdonald is also a member of a Vision Project committee.

Yet who can dispute the lure of Harvard and MIT, especially for companies considering where to locate or to expand? And if Massachusetts already attracts companies based almost largely on the brainpower produced by private colleges and universities, one might question what the state is losing by not investing more heavily in its public system.

Freeland argues that what's missing are the well-educated middle and lower-end workers. Massachusetts attracts research centers, for example, but loses manufacturing.

"We need to be competitive on the high end, but also across the board," he said. Referring to companies considering locating to Massachusetts, he said, "They know Harvard is here. Yes, our historic reputation gets us a look, but it doesn't make the sale."

Wayne Geary, senior vice president, location advisory for **Jones Lang LaSalle**, has many clients — **Yahoo**, for example — looking for locations closer to community colleges that are willing to partner with business in creating programs that fit company needs. Tailoring academic programs to workforce needs is precisely what the Vision Project aims to do, Freeland said, by communicating with businesses about workforce needs and developing academic programs to suit at all levels of the public systems.

Gaining increased state funding for higher education is Freeland's eventual hope with the Vision Project, but that's down the road, when the Vision Project meets goals and targets. More immediately, he is looking for more smaller signs of success.

"I'll feel we're successful when I hear young people saying they're excited to go to UMass Boston or **Bunker Hill Community College**," he said. "And when business leaders say they're excited to be in Massachusetts not just because of Harvard and MIT."