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# High education commissioner Richard Freeland to step down

By **Matt Rocheleau**

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Richard M. Freeland has shaped higher education in Massachusetts for four decades, helping establish UMass Boston, presiding over Northeastern University's rise from commuter school to selective research institution, and overseeing the state's public higher education system through post-recession struggles.

But on Tuesday, he plans to announce an end to the succession of leadership roles.

Freeland, 73, said he will step down as the state's commissioner of higher education at the end of the academic year, capping what will be a six-year tenure highlighted by his push for greater accountability by the system's 29 public colleges and universities. He plans to return to Northeastern to do something he has had little time for: teaching history.

"It's been tremendously rewarding to do this," Freeland said at

his downtown Boston office on Monday morning. “I’ll miss the sense of being able to make that contribution. But in 45 years, I’ve probably done all I can do to move that needle.

“I think we’ve made good progress, and I feel comfortable about where public higher education is in Massachusetts,” he added.

A search for his replacement will launch soon.

Campus leaders said one of Freeland’s legacies will be his knack for finding common ground. “When he comes forward with an idea or a plan, it has substance,” said John O’Donnell, president of MassBay Community College. “He understands that there’s going to be resistance. But he also understands that respectful exchange, and what can even be termed as conflictual exchange, is what it takes to build consensus.”

Freeland’s crowning achievement as commissioner has been the Vision Project, a strategic agenda that outlines ways to improve the academic standing of public colleges and universities in Massachusetts, a system that falls in the middle of the pack when compared with other states. Freeland has stressed that average is not good enough. “I consider public higher education to be a greatly undervalued, underappreciated, and under-supported resource in a state that lives by its brains,” he said.

He has worked diligently to sell his vision of a top-performing public higher education system to residents, legislators, and business owners. And, his strategy for persuading them to increase their support has revolved around holding the campuses more accountable, including by using data to closely monitor performance.

Last year, legislators approved his plan to tie funding for community colleges to the schools’ individual performance, including graduation rates. A similar funding formula may soon be extended to state universities.

Freeland has also armed college trustee boards with more academic data that they can use to evaluate their campus presidents. The greater focus on accountability seems to have resonated with legislators, who made significant increases to state funding for higher education in each of the past two fiscal years.

Governor Deval Patrick called him “a true champion of our public colleges and universities.”

Freeland was met with resistance at times as he sought to centralize governance of the public campuses and to hold them more accountable.

“He took on a really challenging role during some of the worst economic times we’ve seen,” said Mary Grant, president of the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts since 2002, who in January will become chancellor of the University of North Carolina Asheville. “I don’t think there was ever any disagreement that we should have

the best public education, but like anything the devil is in the details.”

Still, Grant said, Freeland is widely respected and has “put his heart and soul” into his job.

Freeland’s career began in 1970 when, one year after earning a doctorate, he became assistant to the president of the University of Massachusetts and was tasked with developing a Boston campus.

He worked at UMass Boston for 22 years, holding numerous positions in the administration. In 1992, Freeland joined the City University of New York to work as vice chancellor for academic affairs.

Freeland was named president of Northeastern four years later, with a goal of vaulting it into the ranks of the top 100 universities nationally. He saw that happen during his 10-year tenure.

Some critics said he should not have based the school’s priorities on formulas created for popular annual rankings. But the school’s academic stature improved: selectivity and graduation rates increased as the university strengthened its signature co-op program and added dorms, academic buildings, research centers, and athletic facilities.

Carol Geary Schneider, president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, said Freeland has had an impact beyond Massachusetts. She cited an initiative he piloted last year to measure what college graduates have learned without using standardized exams. Eight other states are testing the model this fall.

“Richard is recognized everywhere as a transformative leader for public higher education,” Schneider said. “He’s been a powerful force to work with.”

But Freeland has had little time to lead a classroom — until now. “I’ve sort of had an upside-down career in higher education,” Freeland said. “I’d like to be a really good teacher before I retire.”

*Matt Rocheleau can be reached at [matthew.rocheleau@globe.com](mailto:matthew.rocheleau@globe.com). Follow him on Twitter [@mrochele](https://twitter.com/mrochele)*

*Correction: An earlier version of this story misstated the history of UMass Boston.*



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