

Massachusetts Higher Ed commissioner targets sudden college closures

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AMHERST — The Massachusetts Department of Higher Education can — and will soon — expand its regulatory authority to all colleges and universities whose students accept state financial aid, step up financial monitoring of those institutions and make them come up with contingency plans if they are faced with the need to close or to merge.

“What we cannot do is prevent closures,” said Carlos E. Santiago, state commissioner of higher education, Friday during a public meeting at Amherst Town Hall. “I wish I could. But it is unrealistic to expect the Commonwealth to have the resources, financial and in terms of people, to totally prevent this from happening.”

Eighteen Massachusetts private colleges have merged or gone out of business in the last five years. Some with little warning, like Mount Ida last year, and with no plans to help students complete their degrees.

In neighboring Vermont, both Southern Vermont College in Bennington and Green Mountain College in Poultney closed at the end of the 2019 school year.

On Thursday, Vermont’s Marlboro College and the [University of Bridgeport](#), in Connecticut, announced plans to merge.

Hampshire College faced merger or closure earlier this year, but new leadership had pledged to grow the school and keep it independent. It now expects only 15 freshman in the new class.

More formal public hearings on the state regulations are set for Monday, Aug. 5, 10 a.m. at [Quinsigamond Community College](#) in Worcester and the Springfield Public Library at 2 p.m..

Hampshire has raised more than \$9 million in cash and pledges raised toward a goal of \$20 million or more.

Santiago said part of the problem is demographics. The population of college-ready high school students in New England is falling and is expected to continue to fall following a “baby bust” of declining birthrates during the great recession.

“This is our reality for at least the next 15 years,” Santiago, a former chancellor of the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee and provost and chief operating officer at the University at Albany.

The new regulations, he expects the board to vote before December, would have the state monitor the financial health of colleges making sure they have the ability to teach-through, or provide classes and programs so current students can finish their degrees.

He said the state will also require notice, that colleges develop contingency plans and grant college’s confidentiality.

“At some point the difficult decision must be made of when you notify students,” he said. “Knowing that by giving that notification, it becomes much more difficult for a college to recover.”

Santiago said the Board’s jurisdiction now is only over public colleges and universities and over private colleges founded after the end of World War II.

Education is big business in Massachusetts. The state’s private colleges and universities together account for \$36 billion a year in economic activity, according to The Association of Independent Colleges and Universities in Massachusetts.

State Rep. Mindy Domb, D-Amherst, who organised Friday’s meeting along with state Sen. Jo Comerford, D-Northampton, said any regulations need to take the communities where colleges are into account.

“Think of all the business that depend on colleges,” she said. “Think of all the families that depend on those jobs.”