

# EDITORIAL: Time to let SUNY soar

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At the huge but malnourished [State University of New York](#), two facts describe its sorry health in this distressed economy: Its enrollments are up, but state funding is sharply down. So SUNY proposes a sweeping change, to extricate itself from a state budget process that has been starving it - and to loosen the grip of a regulatory system that keeps it from flourishing independently.

To gain that freedom, it has to get permission from the same legislature that has been holding it down and failing to protect it from a steady erosion of state support. SUNY has suffered more than \$500 million in cuts in the past couple of years, including those in the proposed 2010-11 budget.

Not surprisingly, the legislature's response has been to express alarm at what might happen to SUNY and its students if lawmakers let the system fly on its own.

New SUNY Chancellor Nancy Zimpher is unpersuaded by those concerns. In her view, the shackled system can only thrive when it has the freedoms other state systems enjoy. So, she argues, you lawmakers must take a risk and trust us to figure out our own funding arrangements. If you don't, and instead keep us on the budget treadmill, we'll never have the resources we need to reach our potential.

So far, the lawmakers are digging in their heels over tuition, but seem willing to talk on other issues.

Whatever the shape of the final legislation, this is the right time to set SUNY free. It's facing another round of cuts, just as more and more students are flocking to its campuses to avoid crushing tuitions at private institutions. Further, SUNY has the potential to create massive numbers of jobs - if it gets some flexibility.

The university has been trying for "flex" legislation for years, but this time, the effort has a grandiose name: the Public Higher Education Empowerment and Innovation Act, proposed by [Gov. David Paterson](#) in his budget. SUNY pronounces the acronym "FEE-ah." But a key opponent, United University Professions, chooses to pronounce it "FEAR." They worry that it will erode their collective bargaining position and perhaps even put them in a students v. professors struggle for dollars.

Right now, the opposition to real change looks strong. But compromises must be found.

Start with tuition. The bill would let SUNY increase tuition annually by up to 2.5 times the five-year rolling average of the Higher Education Price Index. Legislators, however, think the index is too expensive. So there's no way they'll agree to regular increases 2.5 times as high.

The chancellor will have to come up with a tuition policy that produces more revenue to build up SUNY, but gives arriving freshmen tuition stability and predictability over four years.

That would be better than the historical roller coaster: The legislature rejects tuition increases in good times, then allows big ones in tough times. SUNY students in 1991 got hit with a 30 percent increase, and in 1995 and 2003 there were 28 percent increases. And where did it go? Not to improve SUNY, but to bail out the state.

The legislators talk nobly about the need to maintain access to SUNY at affordable prices. And who can disagree with that? But Dr. Samuel L. Stanley Jr., the new president at [Stony Brook University](#), argues that, unless the university gets more revenue, the students will be getting no more than access to mediocrity.

The legislators are also dead-set against allowing research centers like Stony Brook, which cost a lot more to run, to charge more tuition than smaller schools in the system. Lawmakers don't want students to shortchange their opportunities by choosing a college only because it's cheaper.

But if they won't allow differential tuition, they must figure out how to enrich the funding for the four university centers - Stony Brook, Albany, Buffalo and Binghamton. For Long Island, Stony Brook's success is not optional. It's pivotal.

Then there's the issue of land leases. Every time a campus wants to do anything innovative with its land, it has to get legislative approval. SUNY wants to make those decisions itself, with appropriate review afterward, so it can nimbly take advantage of public-private partnerships. If legislators don't like the extent of the new freedom, they must work to improve it. SUNY can't afford to compete slowly in a high-speed world.

Finally, SUNY wants out from under the sometimes agonizingly slow pre-approvals of purchases and contracts by the state comptroller and attorney general. Post-audit is good enough - and faster.

The new chancellor has traveled the whole state, listening and explaining her ideas. She's been strategic, developing a closer relationship with the [City University of New York](#), a vital ally. Her arguments have been forceful, smooth and clever. But if SUNY is to get results this year, she may have to add one more adjective to her approach: ornery.

Let's not waste this fiscal crisis. This is not the time for the old "We can't give up control" song. The legislature must act in 2010 to let SUNY soar. Inaction is not an option. hN

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