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May 17, 2011

SUNY Grades Itself, and Touts Its Benefits to the State, in First 'Report Card'

By Eric Kelderman

The State University of New York system has released its first-ever "report card," a measure developed during the strategic-planning process led by Chancellor Nancy L. Zimpher during the first year of her tenure.

One of the goals of the [report card](#), like those handed out to students across the country, is to create a sense of accountability—in this case, the 64-campus system's accountability to the State of New York as measured by student-retention and graduation rates, as well as the various economic benefits that SUNY provides to the state.

In the latter category, figures in the report card peg SUNY's purchasing power at \$2.8-billion, the number of jobs supported by research at 5,360, and the contribution of teaching hospitals to its medical schools at \$186-million. Some of those figures are meant to underscore the argument that the system deserves more autonomy over its tuition and business ventures—[freedoms Ms. Zimpher](#) has, so far, been unable to secure from the State Legislature.

Not all of the information is flattering. The document lists the system's retention and graduation rates both for white students and ethnic minorities, revealing the kind of disparities in achievement that plague nearly every public institution in the country.

For example, the six-year graduation rates of first-generation, full-time black or Hispanic students seeking bachelor's degrees are 55 percent and 56 percent, respectively, compared with 63 percent for white students. Only 10 percent of black students pursuing an associate degree earn that diploma within three years.

"We are asking New Yorkers to hold us accountable," Ms. Zimpher said in a written statement. "We want the public to know where we succeed and where we may fall short."

But the system is also using the report card as a public-relations tool, to document SUNY's "contribution to New York State's health and vitality in a concise and efficient manner."

In reframing its academic accomplishments, the system includes a measure called "SUNY Success," which is meant to give a more complete picture of graduation rates by including students who transfer from outside or within the system—groups that are not counted in the federal definition of graduation rates.

Using SUNY's formula, 88 percent of first-generation, full-time students seeking a bachelor's degree earn their diplomas within six years, compared with the 62-percent figure recorded under the federal definition.

The largest improvement from the more-inclusive way of accounting for graduates is for students who transfer into SUNY seeking an associate degree or certificate: Seventy-five percent of that group fit the SUNY success definition, compared with just 24 percent counted under the federal

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