

Aiding SUNY can revive N.Y.

By **NANCY L. ZIMPER**

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With the state's finances at a crisis point, it is time for bold ideas that will not only get us through these difficult times, but return New York to greatness.

The Public Higher Education Empowerment and Innovation Act is an idea of that magnitude.

This landmark legislation shields our students and our campuses from the worst effects of the fiscal crisis while maximizing our potential as a driver of economic recovery.

The State University of New York is in the midst of a strategic plan, the goal of which is to revitalize New York's economy while creating a better quality of life in every community.

This plan, which will be completed next month, will serve as SUNY's roadmap. The Empowerment Act will be the enabling legislation for our ambitious vision.

The legislation removes tuition from the state budget, allowing SUNY to expand enrollment and increase access to excellent education opportunities. It enables SUNY to engage in partnerships with the private sector, which means new revenue to support SUNY and the ability to create 2,000 faculty positions and a total of 10,000 jobs across the system -- along with 65,000 construction jobs for capital projects. The principles of collective bargaining and union worker rights are specifically protected.

Finally, the legislation cuts the red tape that costs SUNY time and money and stifles economic activity. At the same time, it promotes transparency and accountability in our business transactions.

Unfortunately, some critics continue to defend an indefensible status quo, providing no alternative solutions -- only criticisms. In contrast, we understand the need to be proactive and strategic about the future. If current projections are accurate, there will be even less money to go around next year. Business as usual will be nothing short of disastrous.

The Empowerment Act protects students with a comprehensive tuition policy that will enable them to plan ahead for tuition costs. Historically, tuition has gone up the most during tough times, when families can least afford it.

Our tuition plan will maintain affordability and accessibility. We are in the process of developing a detailed tuition policy that would cap total year-to-year tuition increases, while protecting access with expanded financial aid.

These reforms will not "give the state permission to cut SUNY." The steady erosion of support shows that the state long ago gave itself permission to cut SUNY. Worse, when SUNY raised tuition to maintain academic quality, the state has swept those funds into the treasury to close budget gaps elsewhere. These budget cuts and tuition grabs have added up to \$424 million over the past two years.

During this fiscal hurricane, we simply cannot afford to stake everything on the hope of budget

restorations. To do so will lead to diminished access, erosion of academic quality and economic stagnation.

That is why we are leaving no stone unturned to find ways to sustain and grow a world-class system of public higher education. We have come to the table with an innovative, responsible plan, offering the State University as a partner with all who seek to create a better future for our communities.

The Empowerment Act also embodies SUNY's fundamental commitment to accountability and transparency, putting in place oversight procedures for every provision.

When I was hired by the board of trustees, I pledged to "press the reset button" on SUNY's way of doing business. I believe we have succeeded in that effort, with unprecedented participation by our campuses in the budget process, a groundbreaking strategic plan and a newly energized partnership with the City University of New York.

But for SUNY to reach its potential in creating new educational and economic opportunities, we need the Public Higher Education Empowerment and Innovation Act.

The road of excuses, delays and fear has reached a dead end. It is time to set out on a new path that will shore up public higher education, create jobs and begin the process of rebuilding New York.

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