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Unlike Legislature, alumni are raising SUNY funds

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Guest essayist

Inconsistent state support and the lack of a tradition of alumni philanthropy are major roadblocks in the State University of New York's efforts to take its place among leading state universities. SUNY continues to lag behind public universities in such states as California, Michigan and North Carolina in broad recognition of academic excellence.

Now there is bad news and potential good news affecting SUNY's long-standing commitment to provide the best possible education for growing numbers of students. Sharp budget cuts imposed by Gov. David Paterson are bad news for SUNY campuses, straining resources and forcing cutbacks. Such a turn of events is even more disheartening than in the past for SUNY officials and faculty given the tide of optimism raised by former Gov. Eliot Spitzer's advocacy and commitment to provide more resources to enhance SUNY. Spitzer's proposal to create an endowment to supplement annual state support for SUNY has been lost in what seems to be a return to politics as usual in Albany and the notion that SUNY is just another state agency when it comes to cutting the budget. The endowment plan did raise legitimate questions with regard to how it would be funded and dispersed but it landed on the back burner without real discussion in the Legislature.

SUNY, like other public universities, needs an additional source of funding beyond state tax dollars to achieve excellence. That's why alumni philanthropy is critical to SUNY's future.

Unlike states like California, Michigan and North Carolina, SUNY lacks a strong tradition of private support by alumni. The large endowments enjoyed by other private and public universities come in large degree through grateful alumni.

The good news is that after years of making the case for private support and investing more resources to build philanthropy, schools including SUNY Brockport and Geneseo are attracting increased alumni giving. Growing numbers of SUNY alumni are showing their commitment to their alma maters by making major gifts and setting an example for their peers.

There is reason for optimism that this trend will continue and that increased alumni philanthropy will elevate SUNY schools from very good to great in the near future. And that will be good news for all New Yorkers.

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