



THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Public Hearing

of the

Assembly Standing Committee

on

Higher Education

*Examination of New York State
Higher Education Commission's Preliminary
Report and Its Initial Recommendations*

Testimony of

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I would like to express my appreciation to Assembly member Glick and the members of the New York Assembly Committee on Higher Education for holding this important hearing.

The Preliminary Report of the New York State Commission on Higher Education is the latest, and possibly most significant and ambitious, initiative to advance SUNY's standing among the nation's public universities. The Report offers a thoughtful and thorough analysis of the array of factors that have affected SUNY's advance into the ranks of the nation's prominent public universities. The Commission is wise to identify limited investment, excessive government regulation and scarce revenue as important factors that challenge SUNY's ability to respond to New York State's growing educational and economic needs. SUNY operates in a novel higher education environment in which both private and public universities rely on scarce state funding to support their operations.

At the risk of making my testimony a bit too autobiographical I do want to mention that I am a beneficiary of both public and private higher education. I graduated City College of New York with a BA, and obtained my Ph.D. from Columbia University. I have also taught in public and private universities. I was a tenured faculty member at Fordham University, a visiting professor at Cornell and an adjunct professor at Columbia. I also taught for over a decade at Rutgers University, the State University of New Jersey and at the University of Illinois. I mention this because I want to emphasize that both professionally and personally I am very well aware of how valuable public and private higher education is to our society. While New York's

public and private institutions make notable contributions to society, I applaud the Commission on Higher Education for recognizing that our state has a particular obligation to invest in SUNY and CUNY.

SUNY, one of the nation's largest, comprehensive public higher education systems, has for decades provided a diverse range of educational services to the residents of the state. It is crucial for SUNY to prepare legions of well educated graduates who are able to meet the increasingly complex demands of New York State's globally interconnected and demographically changing society. However, SUNY's ability to do so is now at risk. It is at risk not only for the reasons the Commission cited, but also because of a deteriorating fiscal situation that has resulted in revenue shortfalls in New York State's budget. The Commission on Higher Education was inaugurated before government officials were able to gauge the magnitude of the economic downturn that has afflicted the nation. Consequently, the Commission's aspiration for SUNY's accelerated advancement to the upper tier of the nation's public universities has to be tempered by the fiscal realities of the moment. However, since our elected officials agree that SUNY is a remarkable public asset that should be nurtured, the will exists to locate the resources to implement some of the Commission's most significant recommendations.

I am here in my capacity as Vice Provost for Diversity and Educational Equity for the State University of New York, to advocate on behalf of some of the Commission's major recommendations, and to identify one area where the Commission should take decisive action. I believe that in its final report the Commission should propose innovative initiatives to diversify SUNY's academic human resources. The Commission should encourage funding for new academic programs that will prepare SUNY students to live and work successfully in a racially and culturally changing state.

New York State should rebuild the SUNY and CUNY faculty ranks, recognizing that faculty resources have to be differentially allocated on the basis of numbers of students served and campuses that need to be staffed. Moreover, the Commission should emphasize that academic excellence is inextricably linked to recruiting and retaining a diverse faculty. The modest Commission recommendation for 2000 new full time faculty over a five year period is an important step to help move SUNY and CUNY to parity with its national public peer institutions. Faculty are the most precious resource that a college and university possesses and ultimately the standing of any university rests on the reputation of its faculty. In order to recruit exceptional faculty, SUNY must provide them with the research support and an intellectually and scientifically vibrant environment that compare favorably with the nation's best public research universities and colleges. By adopting the Commission's recommendations SUNY will build an academic environment in which faculty can realize their potential as active researchers and knowledge creators, as superb teachers and mentors, as civic minded scholars who will provide valued services to the community, and as entrepreneurs who create new technologies and inventions that benefit society.

The idea that public higher education remains an affordable path to upward social mobility for the economically disadvantaged is becoming progressively more illusory. New York can help reverse this trend and make public higher education more affordable for the state's underserved populations. The state should heed the Commission's call to reduce the educational attainment gap between "Whites and Latinos" as well as African-Americans and provide funding for academic initiatives and programs that seek to redress this serious inequity in public higher education.

The establishment of a \$3 billion Empire State Innovation Fund will help realize Governor Spitzer's dream of making "America's largest public system of higher education one of its very best." However, since the grants will be awarded on a competitive basis this initiative will disproportionately benefit the state's largest and best endowed private universities. Given the long standing disinvestment in SUNY, the university lacks the research infrastructure to equitably compete with the well endowed private universities for Empire Innovation Funds. I believe it is incumbent on New York State to level the playing field by assuring that SUNY's best faculty and campuses are guaranteed access to a large percentage of the Innovation Fund, which, after all, is supported by tax payer's money.

The best public universities operate with a high level of autonomy from government to employ public resources in pursuit of academic excellence and to invest in research that promises economic dividends for the state. The Commission's recommendation for regulatory relief will give further impetus to Governor's Spitzer's aspirations for SUNY's academic ascendancy. The very best faculty and graduate students will be drawn to a university that provides them the autonomy to realize their potential as exceptional teachers and productive scholars and researchers.

By diversifying its academic human resources; which includes the faculty and graduate student body, and by increasing retention and graduation rates of students from groups that are historically underrepresented and students who are economically disadvantaged, SUNY will more readily attain a new level of academic excellence. Throughout the United States, our best universities are acutely aware of the value of diversity to their academic mission. They are aware that their students must acquire cultural competencies and racial/ethnic sensitivities if they are to succeed in the competitive, globalized economy that is the hallmark of contemporary society.

These very universities are also aware that studies abound that document how diversity enhances productivity, creates an environment for innovation and promotes beneficial social outcomes on their campuses.

SUNY cannot aspire to academic prominence if it is unable to create learning environments that expose its students to the realities of a culturally dynamic, demographically changing society that is subjected to a dizzying array of global influences. In its final report, the Commission should consider adopting a more vigorous, comprehensive approach on how best to empower public higher education to promote diversity.

This academic year, SUNY established the Office of Diversity and Educational Equity, which I have the privilege of directing. The goal of the office is to promote academic excellence in the context of carefully devised programs to increase the numbers of exceptional faculty and graduate students from sectors of our population that have been historically underrepresented in higher education, to enhance rates of access and success for students from underserved and racialized communities, and to promote diversity related research and teaching as important elements of SUNY's academic mission. With adequate funding ODEE will devise coordinated initiatives to effectively identify, recruit and situate outstanding scholars in the most academically favorable setting within our system. ODEE will partner with campuses to fortify existing areas of excellence and to develop academic initiatives that advance their distinctive mission in the context of enhancing diversity.

The Office of Diversity and Educational Equity will assist campus units in creating an academic infrastructure to improve undergraduate success rates. An array of targeted initiatives including, but not limited to, STEM diversity scholarships, special undergraduate scholarships programs, student mentoring programs, guided undergraduate research opportunities, and public

service internships, will enhance recruitment and success outcomes for students from communities traditionally underrepresented in higher education, as well as students from economically underprivileged sectors. It is worth noting that undergraduate success is positively correlated with a diversified faculty.

Yet, despite support for ODEE among legislators, educators, the faculty senate, the union of university professionals, the Chancellor of SUNY, and the Board of Trustees, the Office remains woefully under funded.

The Commission would be doing a great service to New York if it endorses a comprehensive system-wide diversity initiative that is designed as an integral component of its policy to elevate SUNY to a new level of academic excellence and economic import.

My thanks once again for this opportunity to share my thoughts on the Commission's report.