Meet Obama’s favorite college leader

By LIBBY A. NELSON | 1/17/14 2:37 PM EST

The next time President Obama touts a new higher education plan, look around. You’ll likely find Nancy L. Zimpher in the background.

Zimpher, the chancellor of the State University of New York system, has become the White House’s go-to college president.

The love reached new heights Thursday, when Zimpher was picked from nearly 100 college presidents at the White House to brief the press corps with Press Secretary Jay Carney. “I think you’d make a great White House press secretary,” Carney joked as Zimpher stepped down from the podium.

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But her star turn in the briefing room was just the latest in what’s become a fruitful partnership with the administration. Obama’s sweeping proposal to overhaul financial aid? Proposed in a speech at SUNY-Buffalo that cited Zimpher as an example to other presidents. A "shopping sheet" to help students understand their loan and grant options? SUNY was one of the first universities to sign on. A new agreement to better prevent campus sexual assault?Forged between the Education Department and, yes, Zimpher’s SUNY.

At a time when many college presidents are...
skeptical at best of the administration's agenda, Zimpher's close ties to the White House stand out. She's a valuable ally. The SUNY system is both enormous — a 64-campus behemoth that runs the gamut from community colleges to top research universities — and relatively centralized. Buy-in from Zimpher is the equivalent of reaching dozens of colleges and hundreds of thousands of students.

(Earlier: College leaders to meet with Obama)

"We're so big, if we get good ideas, we're the kind of place that can really take it to scale," Zimpher said in an interview Thursday night.

Those include ideas the White House wants to encourage, like a vast new online degree program: "She is expanding enrollment, embracing the innovative use of technology, and improving education all along the pipeline," said James Kvaal, deputy director of the Domestic Policy Council.

Like many relationships, it all started with an invitation.

The White House summoned a dozen college presidents, Zimpher among them, to meet with Obama in late 2011 to talk about college costs. At the time, she found herself impressed by the president's attention and his understanding of the challenges facing higher education.

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The administration was impressed, too. "This was really part of her agenda at SUNY regardless of who was in the White House," said Zakiya Smith, a former senior White House adviser for education, now a strategy director at the Lumina Foundation.

She's also media-savvy. Many college presidents speak in winding paragraphs peppered with caveats; Zimpher, a personable career academic who has led three public universities, can turn complex issues into crisp talking points.

So an unofficial partnership was born. When Vice President Joe Biden took his turn meeting with college leaders in 2012, Zimpher was at his right hand. When Obama unveiled his second-term higher ed agenda, she singed her out in his speech.

"I have confidence that our country's colleges and universities will step up — just like Chancellor Zimpher and the folks at SUNY are trying to step up — and lead the way to do the right thing for students," he said in a speech at SUNY-Buffalo.

Zimpher has her own quibbles with some White House proposals. But she and the administration share a similar philosophy on making college pricing easier to understand, and on the need for colleges to demonstrate that taxpayers are getting something for their money.

Public university systems are used to being accountable to state lawmakers, Zimpher said. But she added there were valid concerns about the quality of the data the administration will use when it scores and rates colleges.

Zimpher has also escaped some of the criticism Obama has leveled at other college presidents. The president "has really grounded us on the cost of college," she acknowledged cheerfully in the briefing room Thursday.

But Obama has lauded SUNY for graduating thousands of students each year with a solid education and less debt than many of their peers. For that, in part, Zimpher can thank her state: New York spends more on higher education per student than most. As a result, tuition and fees for state residents are less than $8,000 — just over half the national average.

The low tuition was another plus when looking for a setting for Obama's speech. "He could say, "This is a system really trying to lead,'" Zimpher said.

But it wasn't just the system Obama praised. "Chancellor Zimpher," he said, "is making sure that hundreds of thousands of SUNY students all across the state are getting a world-class higher education."

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