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April 18, 2010

Shaping SUNY Into a Whole Greater Than Its Parts

By Eric Kelderman

Albany, N.Y.

Nancy L. Zimpher admits to being infatuated with self-help books, especially those about corporate leadership. As chancellor of the State University of New York, she may need all the help she can get as she tests her own management theories in an effort to bolster the image and quality of the nation's largest system of public higher education.

During the past decade, SUNY has been plagued by frequent turnover in leadership and hampered by limited cooperation among the system's 64 campuses, which are mired in



Corey Wascinski for The Chronicle

SUNY's size and scope make governance hard for any chancellor, including Nancy L. Zimpher. No other public-college system in the nation encompasses as wide a range of institutions.

[Enlarge Image](#)

competition for sparse resources and hamstrung by state regulations.

Like several previous chancellors, Ms. Zimpher has an ambitious goal: to unite the system's two-year colleges, regional universities, and major research institutions around a common set of goals. A strategic plan she unveiled this month seeks to redefine the role of the system, coordinate the focus of its campuses, and raise its profile both in New York and across the nation.

While the system's larger universities have little incentive to go along with the plans, several campus leaders say the depth of the state's economic and political crises may force them to cooperate to a new degree. And higher-education leaders who know the chancellor say her tenacity and ability to build consensus may help her succeed where others have failed.

Ms. Zimpher, 64, began teaching in a small schoolhouse in Missouri. But she learned about higher education working at large land-grant and urban universities and says she thrives on the size and complexity of the Empire State. She is invigorated by the challenges of the treacherous political landscape and of a diverse and sometimes unwieldy university system. "I know how to deal with big," she says.

A System Adrift

From her office here, on the top floor of an ornate, Gothic tower, Ms. Zimpher can see the Hudson River to the east and the grand, gray-granite State Capitol to the northwest. It's a commanding view, but the office seems to have become a precarious perch. Recent chancellors haven't stayed in the post for long.

Since 2000, the system, which enrolls nearly 465,000 students, has been led by two other chancellors, an

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Approaching her first anniversary as chancellor of the State U. of New York,

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- Nancy Zimpher Tackles a Big Challenge as SUNY's New Chancellor - February 11, 2009
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Nancy L. Zimpher promotes a strategic plan that will reshape the sprawling system into—she hopes—a more unified whole.

interim chancellor, and an "officer in charge," who held the chancellor's authority after the most recent interim officer resigned. Ms. Zimpher began the job in June 2009, two years after the previous chancellor had stepped down.

The frequent changes at the top have come during a period when the state budget has been battered by two national recessions. New York lawmakers had to close a \$21-billion revenue shortfall, an amount equal to 38 percent of the budget, for the 2010 fiscal year, and the state projects a revenue gap of nearly 15 percent for the 2011 fiscal year, which began on April 1.

Gov. David A. Paterson's proposed budget would cut SUNY's funds by \$170-million, an amount that represents nearly a quarter of the cuts for all state agencies. Those cuts would come on top of more than \$400-million in reductions in state aid that the system had to absorb for the 2009-10 budget year.

A lack of money from the state has already contributed to the overall decline in New York's public colleges, according to a report from a gubernatorially appointed commission in 2008 that studied SUNY and the City University of New York.

Revenue shortages created a \$5-billion backlog in building maintenance at the state and city systems and forced campuses to compromise academic quality by hiring too many adjunct and part-time faculty members compared with tenure-track professors, the report said. The commission also estimated that the state had lost 27,000 research-related jobs and as much as \$2.2-billion in research grants and because of the declining quality of its public colleges.

Overregulation by the state has also hampered the system by limiting the constituent universities' abilities to earn and spend their money, the report said. For example, the universities are not allowed to lease their land, and they must go through "layers of micromanagement" for purchasing and contracts, the report said.

With all of its troubles, there is a sense that SUNY "has hit a wall," said Abraham M. Lackman, a former president of New York's Commission on Independent Colleges and Universities.

A Problem Solver

Before she was hired as chancellor, Ms. Zimpher gained a reputation for toughness and determination during her presidencies at two other institutions, said Stephen J. Trachtenberg, president emeritus of George Washington University and a higher-education consultant who has advised Ms. Zimpher. "She's got a lot of grit," he said.

From 2003 until last year, she was president of the University of Cincinnati, where she fired the popular but controversial men's basketball coach, Bob Huggins. He had been arrested in 2004 on a drunken driving charge, and his players, who frequently had run-ins with the law, had abysmal graduation rates.

Despite an outcry from some local sports fans, Ms. Zimpher left Cincinnati with more than a few enthusiastic supporters. She is widely credited with helping to dig the university out of a \$260-million deficit, the result of a campus-renovation program carried out by her predecessor, said H.C. Buck Niehoff, a member of the university's Board of Trustees.

But the hallmark of Ms. Zimpher's leadership at Cincinnati—and, before that, at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, from 1998 to 2003—was the development of an ambitious strategic plan. Two pillows embroidered by a friend with the titles of those plans, "UC 21" and the "Milwaukee Idea," sit in her office at SUNY.

Her plan at Cincinnati sought to enhance the university's academic reputation, research output, and profile within the state. E. Gordon Gee, president of Ohio State University, praised Ms. Zimpher for giving a mid-tier institution new prominence. "What she did for Cincinnati was stake out its place in the world," he said.

At both Cincinnati and Milwaukee, Ms. Zimpher engaged large groups of faculty members,



entrepreneurs into classrooms to show students how to lead in fast-changing environments.

Obama's NASA Budget Could Send More Research Money to Universities

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students, and administrators to help form the framework of her strategic plans. And both of them represented efforts to reinvigorate urban universities that were sometimes thought of as secondary institutions within their states, a notion that steeled her resolve to succeed.

"Serving in an environment where you're not the designated hitter makes you work harder," she said.

For example, in order to set the Milwaukee campus apart from the flagship, in Madison, it joined with the state's two-year colleges to offer training programs, which no other institution in the University of Wisconsin system was interested in at the time, she said. "I had to fight the notion that the only game in town was Madison."

The Next Plan

Ms. Zimpher is now determined to demonstrate her leadership on a statewide basis in New York, starting with the reshaping of the top-level administration at SUNY. She has created two key positions, a vice chancellor for international affairs and a chancellor's deputy for the education pipeline, reflecting her priorities for the future of the system.

And the chancellor's office will be moved from its spot on the 12th floor of the tower to the fourth floor, with the rest of Ms. Zimpher's executive committee. The move is symbolic but is also meant to facilitate better communication among top administrators.

Kenneth P. O'Brien, president of the SUNY University Faculty Senate, said the chancellor's staff choices had been well received. "She has assembled a team that has brought a competence across the board that we have been missing for a long time," he said.

Ms. Zimpher also sought out the views of people across the system by visiting each of the 64 campuses during 2009, her first year in office. The concerns she heard consistently, she said, made it clear that there was a need for a new strategic plan.

That plan, "The Power of SUNY," has eight themes, meant to focus academic programming on the system's strengths and turn SUNY into an indispensable economic engine in the state. Among those themes are creating new business opportunities through research, improving the education pipeline from secondary schools to colleges, improving health-care delivery and research within the state, and creating a more sustainable environment through energy conservation and research.

The plan's development was collaborative, involving hundreds of administrators, faculty members, and students. Now Ms. Zimpher is working to make sure that everyone follows the new strategy. Individual campuses must align their own strategic plans with the system's goals. Presidents will be evaluated based on how their campuses meet specific benchmarks. "We have to tether it to accountability," the chancellor said.

She also has formed a committee to assess the system's program and enrollment needs to eliminate "mission creep" on individual campuses by eliminating or consolidating academic programs that are not cost-effective or necessary to the mission. Some programs could also be expanded if it is warranted, Ms. Zimpher added.

The campus presidents, however, especially at the system's top research universities, are wary of changes that would diminish their authority.

No plan can be a "one size fits all" formula, said Samuel L. Stanley, president of the Stony Brook campus. It is one of the two public universities in New York that belong to the Association of American Universities, a select group of 64 research institutions in North America. SUNY's University at Buffalo is the other.

"We're very interested in keeping the system moving forward, but my primary responsibility is moving Stony Brook forward," he said. "We do want some degree of autonomy."

Ms. Zimpher acknowledged that the presidents may not be so willing to go along with any specific program cuts. "What they think is this turf problem, this mission creep is something that needs to be solved, and what they assume is that it will be solved in their favor," she said.

Despite criticism that SUNY is inefficient, with too many campuses, Ms. Zimpher said closing institutions is not on her agenda. But she said she may consider consolidating the

administrations of some campuses to save money.

Political Challenges

SUNY's size and scope are among the factors that have made it difficult to govern. No other public system of higher education in the nation encompasses as wide a range of institutions, from two-year technical colleges to research universities. The state's population, the third-largest in the country, includes the wealth and prestige of Manhattan as well as the extreme poverty and isolation in its upstate region, which has been steadily losing people and industry for decades.

Another major governance challenge for SUNY is the state's political and regulatory climate. The state government has been in a nearly constant state of turmoil since 2006. And the layers of red tape for higher education are thicker here than in nearly any other state. For example, when students at SUNY's four-year colleges pay their tuition, the money first goes to Albany, where state lawmakers must agree to send it back to the campuses.

Ms. Zimpher has already begun an effort to unravel some of the bureaucracy. Through meetings between her top financial aide and the governor's budget director, Governor Paterson was persuaded to propose changes that she and other SUNY officials wanted in the 2011 fiscal year.

In light of probable budget cuts, Ms. Zimpher said, the measures would give the state universities opportunities to save money and earn more revenue by allowing SUNY to set higher tuition on some campuses. The governor's proposal would also take tuition out of the state's budget, preventing lawmakers from putting the money back into state coffers, and instead give control of it to the universities.

"Tuition should go to campuses, not to close budget gaps," Ms. Zimpher said during a recent meeting with State Sen. Suzi Oppenheimer, a Democrat and chairwoman of the chamber's Standing Committee on Education, and several of her staff members. "We're the only state in the country where the tuition goes to the state and then the Legislature decides what it will give back. You might as well call it a tax on students."

The senator said she would try to advance pieces of the regulatory changes, but the prospects are uncertain at best. The state budget is three weeks overdue, and Governor Paterson, who had previously pressed for the changes, is beset by controversy and has dropped his re-election plans.

Working with the politically powerful unions that represent faculty and staff members at SUNY is another complication for Ms. Zimpher.

Phillip H. Smith, president of the United University Professions, the nation's largest higher-education union and one that represents 56 percent of the nearly 57,000 employees on SUNY's four-year campuses, said the chancellor is "naïve" to argue for regulatory freedom rather than fight harder for increased appropriations. Since the regulatory changes are controversial, he said, the system could end up without those and without more money as well.

The union is also concerned that the public-private partnerships that would be allowed under the proposed regulatory changes would operate with nonunion staff members and be exempt from the collective-bargaining process.

Ms. Zimpher said she was surprised by Mr. Smith's strong reaction, especially after her extensive discussions with the union about the need to present a unified front to lawmakers. Like the union, Ms. Zimpher said, her goal is to retain and eventually increase the number of faculty members in the system.

Several SUNY presidents and national higher-education leaders said it was clear that without a systemwide approach to both the regulatory changes and the strategic goals, all of the institutions will suffer.

Ms. Zimpher is bringing the disparate campus leaders together by making sure that individual campuses will not flourish unless the entire system flourishes, said Mr. Trachtenberg. "They're all in the same boat."

Mr. O'Brien, of the Faculty Senate, said politicians, too, must recognize the need to redefine the relationship between the system and the state. And he trusts in Ms. Zimpher's ability to develop consensus and think strategically.

"This chancellor," he said, "is the absolute best hope we've got."

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