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BRINGING CO-OP TO SCALE

HOW SUNY IS PREPARING STUDENTS FOR SUCCESS & MEETING NEW YORK'S WORKFORCE NEEDS

By Nancy L. Zimpher
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American higher education cannot lose sight of the elegantly simple, yet monumentally important task that our nation's colleges and universities must achieve with each graduating class – meeting the workforce demands of a 21st-century global economy and preparing students for a prosperous future. At the State University of New York (SUNY), we are retooling our workforce development programs en masse to hit this mark and, with broad support from WACE, cooperative education is at the core of our efforts.

SUNY is the country's largest, most comprehensive system of higher education, comprised of 64 college campuses representative of every sector and located within 30 miles of every residence, school, and business in the state. In recent years, SUNY has embraced this expansive reach and refocused its mission on serving the needs not just of the students who attend our colleges while they attend them, but on serving all children, from cradle to career.

We start by increasing access to our colleges for students from every walk of life and engaging with New York's P-12 educators to ensure that when students reach SUNY, they are truly college-ready. We continue by making sure our students have the best chance to complete their degrees on time and with less loan debt. And we fulfill our commitment to all of our stakeholders – students and their families, school districts and teachers, and business and employers – by delivering academic degree programs that meet workforce demands and producing graduates who have the skills needed to fill today's jobs.

This triad of Access, Completion, and Success is SUNY's promise to New York and to everyone who lives and works here. An increasingly popular and integral part of our commitment is a program we call SUNY Works, a cooperative education and formal internship collaborative that spans our campuses and traverses the state. We have created an open dialogue with employers state-wide to be sure SUNY is providing the job training their businesses need to grow and thrive. In every region, SUNY faculty are working directly with employers to develop academic curricula and include as part of the course paid, on-the-job work experience within the students' field of study.

This give-and-take partnership is quickly becoming the answer to New York's economic development needs, and its potential has national investors and local employers, alike, jumping at the chance to be a part of SUNY Works. Lumina Foundation for Education awarded SUNY a critical start-up grant that has been followed with funding from Carnegie Corporation, which says their support is a result of SUNY's focus on addressing "the rapid and dislocating change in educational requirements, which has resulted in the skills and experiences—that once served working adults well—being eclipsed by the enormous economic and technological changes in the workplace, especially in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM)."



Already, our campuses have partnered with some of the state's largest companies such as GLOBALFOUNDRIES, General Electric, and IBM to develop co-op programs, as well as local companies that have unique needs, like Mahany Welding Supply and medical device manufacturer Welch Allyn, Inc.

More than 20 academic majors and programs at our SUNY Oswego campus, for example, incorporate cooperative education, as partnerships with a wide range of businesses and associations offer students the best opportunities for job placement in the region and valuable exposure to professional expectations and practices. “By fostering partnerships



Culinary students at Schenectady County Community College put the finishing touches on a wedding cake.

between colleges and business, our co-op students are afforded greater opportunities for employment after graduation,” says Lorrie Clemo, SUNY Oswego provost and vice president for academic affairs. “Co-ops also serve as a critical key to unlocking our region’s potential for economic growth by retaining intellectual capital in-state. By earning a salary while participating in the program, students also manage educational expenses and loan indebtedness more reasonably, making college more affordable.”

Kimberly M. Townsend, associate general counsel of Welch Allyn, says the company’s partnership with SUNY Oswego has kept them competitive. “We are in a highly technologically intensive industry, one that requires specialized skill sets that are very difficult to find, and SUNY Oswego worked with us to help us develop a talent

pool of people who are able to meet those skill gap needs,” she says. “The students that we’ve had join us are technically excellent. They are highly marketable and would be very relevant in the marketplace, and they have been a tremendous asset to us. We’re very grateful for the partnership we have with SUNY Oswego and we anticipate that those opportunities will only grow in the future.”

“The opportunity just seemed too good to pass up,” says Amy Lalonde, an Applied Math major who participated in the Welch Allyn program. “My co-op at Welch Allyn served as the perfect segue from my undergraduate education in applied mathematics to my graduate education in biostatistics. For much of the summer, I worked with little supervision, statistically, while my supervisor was away on maternity leave, and this aspect of my experience could not have prepared me more for the self-confidence and ambition I needed to enter a rigorous Ph.D. program in statistics. It also exposed me to the great responsibility that a statistician takes on as a member of a team – responding to the unique statistical issues each project posed to ensure reliable results and an overall commitment to quality. Furthermore, I was part of a business with an incredible corporate culture that encouraged me and my coworkers to better ourselves while growing the company.”

The benefits that co-op programs bring equally to colleges, employers, and students is proving to be an especially winning combination at SUNY’s 30 community colleges, where campus missions are even more keenly focused on workforce development. At Schenectady County Community College (SCCC), for example, experiential components are being interwoven into many of the most popular programs among students and those which, again, meet targeted industry needs locally such as Criminal Justice, Casino Gaming Management, Nanotechnology, and Culinary Arts.

Emily L. Miller graduated from SCCC in 2010 with an associate’s degree in Tourism and Hospitality Management, and went on to earn a Bachelors of Business Administration in the same field from one of SUNY’s four-year colleges, SUNY Delhi, in 2012. As part of a partnership program between the colleges and a local company, Emily later secured a full-time position with Mazzone Hospitality, one of New York’s largest in the field.

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“Being able to work in the field I was studying was an unbelievable experience that helped to further my education,” says Emily, who has now worked at Mazzone for five years. “It was because of SCCC that I was introduced to and given the opportunity to work for this company, which I have been able to turn into a career beyond anything I have ever imagined. It was always surreal to see what I was learning in the classroom translated into real life, and vice versa. I am so grateful to SCCC and to Mazzone Hospitality for giving me the opportunity to find out what I love to do and be able to do it every day. The knowledge that SCCC gave me has made it possible for me to advance in my career at a rapid pace.”

To ensure that their students can enjoy this level of success in the workplace, SCCC requires students working toward associate degrees in Restaurant and Hotel Management or Culinary Arts to log 600 hours of work experience with local employers that have partnered with the college for job training.



Fabiel Nunez, a junior Engineering Science major at SUNY's Stony Brook University, says, "In this co-op program at Client Support I was able to apply my knowledge of programming to real world applications. I was also able to help execute large projects while at the same time increasing both my interpersonal and technical skills."



SUNY Oswego Math Major Amy Lalonde says her co-op experience with a local medical device manufacturing company was "too good to pass up."

enough people qualified to do the work. At SUNY, we believe in the power of cooperative education to fuel today's economy and to help our students become more successful.

SUNY is working to ensure that each of the half a million students we educate each year has access to co-op, and our continued partnership with WACE has been a invaluable to the faculty on our campuses and the employers in our communities who are carrying out our commitment.

At a time when student loan debt has surpassed credit card debt and the job market is ripe for a highly-skilled workforce trained to meet the demands of today's economy, we believe SUNY Works gives the nation a model for the future of college education and, in the meantime, serves our evolving mission as an economic driver.

“The work experience requirement helps students develop knowledge, skills, and even attitudes necessary to succeed in the vastly expanding hospitality industry,” says SCCC President Quintin B. Bullock. “Our co-op students graduate with a higher understanding and a greater ability to apply concepts they have learned in our classrooms and labs to real-life, on-the-job experiences. As a result of our expanding commitment to cooperative education, SCCC graduates have an advantage over others competing for a job in their field and local businesses have a hand in preparing their future employees.”

The fact is, local businesses and 21st-century companies are having difficulty finding employees who meet their hiring criteria. The top 30 Fortune 500 companies today have approximately 140,000 jobs sitting vacant because there simply aren't