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### Q&A: Nancy Zimpher, Chancellor of SUNY

AMY ELLIOTT BRAGG, ISSUE MEDIA GROUP | MONDAY, AUGUST 20, 2012



SUNY CHANCELLOR NANCY ZIMPHER -

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It should go without saying that Nancy Zimpher, board chair of CEOs for Cities, believes in cities, And as Chancellor of the State University of New York (SUNY) -- the largest comprehensive system of

universities, colleges and community colleges in the nation -- you'd better believe she believes in changing the way education works in our cities. Central to her work at SUNY is *The Power of SUNY*, a sweeping strategic plan that identifies a seamless education pipeline as key to New York's economic health and quality of life.

Prior to becoming Chancellor of SUNY in 2009, Dr. Zimpher served as President of the University of Cincinnati, where she co-created the **Strive Network**, an innovative cradle-to-career partnership, and as chancellor of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Zimpher serves on the board of CEOs for Cities.

We spoke to her about what civic leaders, higher ed institutions, and community partnerships can do to improve graduation rates -- and elevate the life of everyone living together in the intense density of our cities.

***TDN: What role do cities play in developing talent and improving college graduation rates? Why focus this effort at the city level?***

**Chancellor Nancy Zimpher:** The biggest and most obvious factor is that increasingly, our population is shifting toward metropolitan areas. This recognition that 75% of the world's population will be living in cities in the not

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too distant future is driving all of us to pay attention the quality of life in cities.

That quality of life depends on the education level of residents. To get the most out of living in close proximity, our goal, through the Talent Dividend and through the work we're doing in our cities, is to increase the number of people in our cities who are highly educated and prepared.

***TDN: What's the most important thing a city can do to get more people into, and successfully through, college?***

**NZ:** I'm not totally objective about this, having worked in this area for decades, but in the recent past, specifically through the work I was involved with in Cincinnati, I've learned that one key to advancing the number of residents who are highly educated is to look very carefully at the whole pipeline of the educational experience. We have to pay attention to birth, some even say prenatal care; we have to see that children at a very young age are engaged with their families in reading and word development and make sure they have access to quality preschool and are prepared to enter kindergarten. Beyond that, you can't let up. Look at key transition points -- third and fourth grade, the transition to middle school, to high school, to college and ultimately to life and career.

The greatest factor for success is to see education as a continuum and to work with young people in our cities at every step to make sure they stay the course.

***TDN: What needs to happen in higher ed to improve college attainment nationwide?***

**NZ:** Higher ed has to work more closely with early ed. There are a lot of things we can do early on to make sure kids arrive at our doors ready for college coursework.

One is to align what gets taught with what's expected in college. The **Common Core Curriculum** will really help with that.

Another is to fix problems when they first appear so we're not experiencing very high numbers of remediation for students who are not ready to do college work. We are spending millions on essentially teaching the same courses twice, rather than getting it right the first time. If we all try to do that more effectively, we'd have fewer problems when kids arrive at school.

***TDN: What are you doing at SUNY to address these challenges?***

**NZ:** The first way SUNY is trying to grapple with this is by calling it out. We have identified six goals in our strategic plan, and one of those is to seal the leaks in the education pipeline. We are saying, We have a problem, and we need to fix it.

We've implemented multiple strategies:

We are creating a number of early college high schools, so students of high need, students who are unlikely to make it to college, are being talked to about college and being offered college-level classes they can take while they're in high school.

Right now we have two dozen early college high schools across the State of New York.

We have created cradle-to-career networks in New York City and the rest of the state. In this model, communities organize cradle-to-career partnerships that ensure Pre-K-12 schools connect to higher ed, and to the businesses and industry, community organizations, the government, and other stakeholders. These partnerships are in place to make sure every student stays on target throughout their education.

We are trying to help the State of New York figure out how to assess college readiness earlier in high school, preferably during sophomore year. We are working with the New York State Education Department to find a mechanism for assessing college readiness as early as sophomore year. This will help us make sure gaps are closed while students are still in high school.

And we have a number of other projects underway. We're building more bridge programs over the summer. We are also trying to improve the quality of teachers in our school districts who teach our future students.

Learn more about SUNY's Education Pipeline efforts [here](#).

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**Thomas Lasley**

Dr Zimpher has been such a visionary regarding the need for systemic thinking...without such efforts, our communities will continue to be compromised in terms of their capacity to "deliver" the graduates that our cities and our national economy require...

Tom Lasley

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