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Keeping SUNY sound in a fiscal crisis

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California Gov. Jerry Brown proposes to cut his state's higher-education system by \$1.4 billion this year, which will likely lead to more tuition hikes and hundreds of thousands of students being denied access. North Carolina's state university faces thousands of job cuts and the elimination of the same number of course sections. The story is the same in Indiana, Louisiana and across the nation, where the states have a combined deficit of approximately \$140 billion.

My colleagues in higher education know we'll all be forced to manage severe budget cuts. Over the past three years, the State University of New York has already seen a total reduction of \$1.1 billion in state support, or roughly, one-third of our state operating budget.

This is our reality, and with another \$40 billion in projected state deficits over the next three years, it's not getting better anytime soon.

The principle that guides my every action as SUNY chancellor is excellence in education. Our obligation as a state university is a commitment to maintaining the academic quality that best serves the needs of our students, faculty and all New Yorkers.

To achieve this in the face of our economic crisis is a daunting task. I am advocating for a new approach, one that finds innovative strategies to raise revenue from alternative sources.

First, SUNY must have regulatory relief from the state to allow our 64 campuses to enter into public-private partnerships that advance our core mission and values, protect collective-bargaining rights and advance the interests of the private sector while generating revenue and creating jobs. We also need to cut the red tape surrounding the procurement of goods and services.

Gov. Cuomo has talked at length about the need to streamline government to work for the people. I am hopeful that we can partner with the governor to strip away some of these overly burdensome regulations, giving us tools we need to generate revenue for public higher education.

Tuition is the final component. At this time, no final decision has been made about our tuition this year. We will continue to work with our campus presidents, the SUNY Board of Trustees, Gov. Cuomo and the Legislature to determine how best to approach SUNY's tuition revenue for the upcoming year. What we do promise is that our students come first.

We need continued support for access via New York's unique Tuition Assistance Program, a fair and equitable tuition policy that has a five-year planning window for students and their parents -- and an assurance that tuition will feed the campuses' ability to provide courses and programs that speed time to graduation for our students.

Context is important: Any discussion must include the fact that tuition at SUNY's four-year colleges and universities is now \$4,970 a year -- the lowest among public universities in the Northeast, and among the lowest in the nation.

All of our key partners must do their part to protect the mission of public higher education: the state through regulatory reform, SUNY through transparent and efficient use of resources and our students by paying a fair, equitable and reasonable tuition.

We are fortunate to have a partner in Gov. Cuomo, who has shown himself to be an advocate for our great university system and has tapped SUNY and higher education to "be the key economic driver" for New York.

He has recognized that SUNY plays a significant role in the revitalization of our economy. We produce the graduates who become prospective employees -- but we also help to create jobs via business incubators and tech transfers. And in many communities, we are one of the largest employers.

Ultimately, I believe my role as chancellor is about more than just higher education: SUNY has an obligation to be a good civic partner with the state and every community where we have a campus, and the most pressing need of our time is to revitalize our economy. If we are given the tools, SUNY can help to enhance the quality of life for the residents of New York.

Nancy L. Zimpher is SUNY's chancellor.

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