

WAMC interview with Chancellor Nancy Zimpher
July 18, 2009

Alan Chartock: Hello, I am Alan Chartock joining me today is the newly appointed Chancellor of the State University of New York, Nancy Zimpher. In February the SUNY Board of Trustees voted unanimously to name Dr. Zimpher the 12th Chancellor of SUNY, the largest company and system of Public Higher Education in the country. She is the 1st woman to be named Chancellor in SUNY's 60 year history. Nancy Zimpher welcome and thanks for joining us and your reputation for excellence procedure.

Nancy Zimpher: Well I can say the same for you Alan Chartock. Thank you very much for your hospitality today.

AC: We are glad you are with us. One of the things that you are known for is excellence another is taking no prisoners. You are a very strong person and I think that is what SUNY needs. However, where did this reputation for strength come from? There's the story about your having been tough on your last university with the basketball program and showing up every week and having them sometimes boo you. Is that true, is that a true story?

NZ: That is a true story, I am sorry to say. The booing was just a part of the fan based community and it was of course an expression of the peoples love for athletics and I just want to at the offset Alan, is I am a very strong advocate of collegiate athletics and I love student athletes. But that was a situation where the university had engaged in a very aggressive and ambitious strategic plan around excellence and equality and integrity and I guess you use the phrase all boats must rise. So I suppose for some it was a controversial decision but it was one that was made with a great deal of thought and commitment. So once you make that decisions that are tough like that as you know Alan, you have to stay the course and so there you have it.

AC: I love the fact that you did it. I love the fact that you went and looked them in the eye. I think that was great.

NZ: There is no hiding, you make a tough decision. I am sure this is going to be true at The State University of New York. First, you do your homework, make an in-depth observations and data collections as you can and then you make a decision which have to hold forth on. I guess it doesn't mean Alan, that you can't change your mind and I have changed my mind and made mistakes I had to correct, but on the whole I think what you do is you have a sort of quality and value context. In our case we had a very important strategic plan. This was moving our collegiate athletic program forward; it was a big part of our plan. So when you are making a tough decision and if you can fall back on what was your plan in the first place that can really help and I hope that will help us at SUNY.

AC: So where did you get this strength to be you? In other words is it parental is that where your character comes from? Can you give us a little short insight into what makes Nancy Zimpher?

NZ: Well, one never really knows, but I have to say I have a very strong small town mid-western upbringing. People are always talking about the Midwest ethic and value system so maybe I am a product of that. In this small community where I grew up there was no room for error. Everybody saw everything and then I might add that my mother and father were both educators and my mother was actually a teacher at my high school so I was under pretty close scrutiny and she was a very strong minded individual and I think maybe it is a little bit in my DNA.

AC: And yet you have the power with all of that parental pressure, community pressure, to look the dragon in the eye and say you shall not pass. That is coming from somewhere.

NZ: Well I actually think it comes strength of character and the ability to make strategic decisions comes from experience you know. So I am no spring chicken. I have been around, I have been in Higher Education for as long as I can remember and I am an academic and I understand the University

environment. I think one of the critical things since we started here about our collegiate athletics system is everybody has to understand it operates within a context of a university and maybe that is not widely understood because like many of our institutions the fan base comes from all over. We love that, but it still comes because we have these programs in a university which is a powerful profound teaching, learning environment where character and integrity counts.

AC: And do I hear you saying that the tail can not be permitted to wag the dog?

NZ: Yeah that might work for me Alan, Work for you?

AC: Yes, it does indeed. Ok, so how is SUNY perceived in the larger academic world? Are we where we should be, we have the largest but do we have the best?

NZ: Well, I will tell you my likeard scale. When I came to Cincinnati, Jim Collins is good to gripe was, read by everybody and I really think I understood what he meant by, "good to great." Good was really outstanding, but greatness was function of certain principles of leadership and organizational development that had to be heated, so I think as people got the notion that nobody wanted to be good, everybody wanted to be great. I found myself saying well fine, and then we will go from great to premier. So I think wherever SUNY is and if we really had an absolute estimate of our reputation nationally and internationally, it can and will get better.

AC: So you have been touring every one of the State University campuses and there are a lot of them. 64 of them. What do you look for when you go to them?

NZ: Well, I look for greatness. I have to say that I was asked in a media interview not to long ago, what is the one universal characteristic of the institutions you are visiting. And you know how sometimes the answer just pops out and you learn from your own answer what your thoughts are. My immediate pop out answer was that every campus I have visited, by the way I am on my 25th visit today to the great college at Oneonta, through the good services of WUOW with 2 w's in it its call letters I might add, what I thought the underlying characteristics of these institutions is that they feel they are the best. The best and so prideful. So I think what should concern me as their Chancellor is that pride and that sense of we are the best should scale up to the State University of New York. And I think that is an underdeveloped; under exposed, under performing view of the State University of New York and it is really where we've got to go.

AC: Well you know for all of these years I taught at New Paltz, I loved it and in Albany and one of the things that I found was that you get a great leader for example Steve Poskanzer at New Paltz.

NZ: Yes, who I have met and I had a wonderful visit there and a wonderful visit at UAlbany.

AC: When you meet these people a lot has to do with leadership, doesn't it? I mean it is not just conceptual about where a place is, but who on the campus will take you to the next step?

NZ: Right, well in the presence of President Nancy Kleniewski today, I have to say that I to think leadership is the difference maker. I do think that leadership can not be imbedded in anyone individual; it is about the leadership team, it is about the spirit of leadership, it is about the combination of faculty, staff, students, community and alumni. But I have followed on the heels of someone who writes and talks a lot about leadership. I do not know if you know or not, Warren Bennett was once President of the University of Cincinnati and in fact was in New York for a time, I think University at Buffalo, and he is somebody I have gotten to know and I read the literature on leadership, I read the literature on corporate development, I read the leadership literature on change and I kind of have my own operating theory on leadership, so it is important to me and its is important to the Presidents of our campuses are aggressive and vigorous leaders and by that is what I found.

AC: So you just teased me a little bit Nancy Zimpher, and that was with the question of your own personal theory of leadership, what is that?

NZ: Well, I am still working on it. It is a work in progress, but I certainly have come to value the power, a vision and that is exactly why we are launching the strategic planning process at SUNY because we need a vision of our future and a vision of who we are and what we are going to become. I also believe that vision has to be derived at the hands of many. I have to tell you Alan, I had a member of the Student Assembly say "Isn't that your job? Aren't you the one who is to articulate the vision?" I have to say well I suppose I could. I have been in higher education for so long, but if really only matters that this vision is owned by the various key constituencies who then turn visions to actions to hold ourselves accountable for those actions and seek that the pocketbook to implement our aspirations and our actions and then I know you will be glad I am rounding up my theory of leadership here, that lastly I am the Chancellor must be the persistent and consistent and constant carrier of that vision as an advocate, a tireless advocate for the system. So those perspectives on leadership have helped me in the past and I hope they will help in the future.

AC: Nancy Zimpher you mentioned the "p" word pocketbook. When I went to Hunter College in the Bronx, it was absolutely free, no money at all. I have always thought personally that higher education should be treated as a portal for democracy and as a great equalizer. But the state is broke right now and you have been thrown into this swimming pool. How do you deal with it?

NZ: Well you know, you giving your own interests know disciplines of all the commentary on public higher education is swiftly or has already become a private good. It was in the history of America that public education was really a birth right that it was a public good and that all of society would benefit, if all our citizens were educated to the highest level. I am acutely aware of the financial crisis in New York and I think there are several amendable aspects of our budgeting process that will help us. For one thing, I am very interested in the way we manage our capital budget. We do it in a 5 year time frame where you can be much more planful about construction, renovation, differed maintenance, and the demands that are placed on our campuses and sometime soon I would like to see our operating budget be in more extend intervals. This was discussed as you know in the commission on higher education report now a couple of years ago. So out of that comes a more rationalized system of tuition, hopefully tuition won't continue to escalate, but I think we have to realize the State of New York and economic turn around before that is really going to be the case, so I think we need to be more planful in longer intervals and I think we are going to make a successful case for some new operating mandate for The State University of New York that will really allow us to be the economic engine that everyone is counting on and I really do not need to detail those, but that's the conversation that I know we can have with the Legislators and the Governor going forward.

AC: I think a lot of our listeners would be very interested in what just came out of that last sentence of yours and that is that SUNY not only the educating, but they will be an economic engine in particular areas and just sort of again teased us and said, "I have some ideas on that," what are they?

NZ: Well, you know this is a good example of being in Oneonta, or I could use Long Island, I could use Utica/Rome, these are areas where we have two, three, four campuses, we have 2 year colleges, we have Technical Schools, we have 4 year baccalaureate and masters degree institutions and in several of our regions we have doctoral degree granting institutions and medical institutions. What I will promote and I believe will be responded to because I think this is what our Presidents are doing is that they come together that they be significant conveners in their community if you will, in the development of the regional collaborative economic development plan and we are what you call, what has been called "sticky" capital. We are anchor enterprises, we are not moving our corporate head quarters to somewhere else in New York or god for bid out of the state of New York and we are exactly the people who ought to be partnering and leading these economic discussions and one of the things Alan I think we at SUNY have to do a better job of is sharing the evidence or economic outcomes that come from our collective work and that is going to be a huge charge for my chancellor ship.

AC: Now, Chancellor Nancy Zimpher, if you are just joining us from The State University of New York, tell us about some of the inviting that has gone on for years at SUNY and what you might do about it, for example, there are University Centers where Graduate students are taught, there are 4 year schools, I taught at both of them, and sometimes there has been talk that there is not enough to go around, we

should put more centers of excellence and let the others go by the way side, that is not going to happen, is it?

NZ: Well, the good thing about being new is that you did not live that history and the bad thing about being new is that you got to learn that history. I began my education of SUNY at the 60th Anniversary of the SUNY System held in April at UAlbany and I learned a great deal about our past. But, words like inviting, competing with each other, that is competing for students, I want us to compete for excellence. I don't think our competition is ourselves, I think our competition is global and we should be more coordinated and collaborative in working together for the betterment of the whole SUNY, which I think is greater than the sum of its parts, and therefore be a really formidable competitor with other institutions in our region, in the country, and in the world. So I think what I want to do is foster a collaboration and I think we need a more comprehensive strategic enrollment plan and process so that we know if and I suspect the answer is yes, SUNY is going to grow, where it is going to grow. I like the mission differentiation of SUNY. I think it is very effective that we have mission discipline in our technical schools, in our community colleges, in our comprehensive colleges which offer baccalaureate and masters degrees and then in our doctoral granting and medical institutions and I think SUNY Central has to be a more effective mediator, or broker with campuses who want to step outside their mission designation if you will. So, I think specifically to your question, we have to invest in excellence at every level. But, that does not mean distribution of resources should be just spread on a base percentage, I think it should spread around excellence. So look for us to really highlight our investment in excellence.

AC: Now years ago there was a planning process which meant each of your college and universities there was a sign of designation. I think when I got to New Paltz in 1970; they named New Paltz the African as in Africa and Asian Center. Jerry Benjamin and I sat down, well that is nice, but we are going to Legislature, we started the Legislative Gazette, we started the first modern internship program. So sometimes these places have lives of their own based on their faculty. How do you deal with that?

NZ: Well, I think you update these long standing perceptions and of course when I was at New Paltz, not too long ago, I had a wonderful conversation by the way with Jerry Benjamin, whom I first met him at the 60th Anniversary for The State University of New York, and I suspect that we need to reinvent the image that is carried by each of the campuses, and as importantly Alan, if global studies for instance is a strength at New Paltz still, and it is also a strength of a dozen other campuses, why can't we then create networks across the SUNY system that lists up these specializations at the same time acknowledging that for instance, New Paltz is this incredible baccalaureate and masters experience that offers many problematic degrees.

AC: So, I guess if I am asking the questions on behalf of everyone who is listening, and as we started by saying you were a very aggressive and well regarded and tough person when needed to be. What happens when somebody or something is underperforming?

NZ: Well, it is interesting, someone along the way very early in my campus visits which has been going on since June 1st, remarked to me that SUNY is the best underperforming asset of the State of New York and I said, "well, don't hold back, tell me what you think." I think we are going to be all about high performance and excellence and in that array, I think it maybe the case that there are programs that have outlived their capacity to perform. We will be just as diligent about those discoveries as we will our primary responsibility which is to lift up programs of excellence. One of the things higher education is criticized for is not being swift and fascicled about the decisions it makes and I do think that we have to work on much expedited time line and make decisions much faster then we are now without the cumbersomeness of several rims of review even though we have to be very vigilant and I think we also know that program review is something that we share with The State Education Department and I would say both of us need to move our time line up, and I look very much forward to working with Chancellor Merryl Tisch and the interim and new commissioner of SED as well.

AC: So I only have 3 minutes left of your valuable time and I really want to ask you these 2 things. What happens when a politician leans on you to do something that you don't think is in the interest of the university?

NZ: Well, I guess that is your backbone training. I think I take; I make every effort to make my position clear. I will tell you that my very first impulse is to find the sweet spot between the legislators view and my view. So that this does not spill over to that is personal, not professional and something that is a long standing grievance. Look for me to be a peace maker first and then to stand tall.

AC: You mentioned Merryl Tisch and the Regents. What about your own board, you have a wonderful board chair, and they voted for you unanimously. Do you have to put a lot of time in taking care of them?

NZ: Well, I do not consider it care and feeding. I actually have this extraordinary board and Carl Hayden as the chair; is you know, he was the first entrée to the search process. I of course did my homework. I was so impressed with his knowledge of education, the role he served previously with the Regents and his leadership on the board and I am just absolutely privileged to serve for him and beside him and then I could go right down the docket, we have extraordinary board members there, they are knowledgeable, they are committed, they have had to do more than their share of managing during these interim periods. I want to see them in their policy role. I think they are eager to be in their policy role and think this is just a dynamic combination. We are going to put together an extraordinary leadership team at SUNY Central and they will work hand and glove with this board. My privilege, Alan.

AC: All I can say is we are delighted to have you; we are going to have you again and again.

NZ: I hope so.

AC: Because obviously this was not enough time, but we wish you every bit of success in this tremendous undertaking that you are going to take forth and thank you for making this time today.

NZ: Well, I am very excited; thank you for your hospitality and I hope we have more occasions in the future Alan.