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Nancy L. Zimpher

Chancellor, State University of New York

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Posted: 12/08/2012 2:52 pm

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each graduating class, and that is meeting the workforce demands of a 21st Century global economy and preparing students for a prosperous future. At SUNY, we are achieving this by working outside our conventional scope, breaking down silos, and expanding upon the traditional mission of higher learning.

We are engaged with New York's K-12 educators to ensure that when students reach us, they are truly college-ready. We are working with Governor Andrew Cuomo to position our colleges and universities as economic drivers, with international partners to offer a global student experience, and with state and federal agencies to assess workforce needs.

Perhaps most importantly, we have an open dialogue with employers to make sure we are providing the job training they need to grow and thrive in New York and across the country.

This is the foundation of cooperative education -- a partnership between colleges and local employers, where employers work directly with faculty to develop

academic curricula and include as part of the course paid, on-the-job work experience within the students' field of study. Across the country, more and more colleges are turning to these types of programs to fill local voids in the workforce while giving students an edge on securing full-time employment after graduation.

Businesses and companies are able to play an active role in training and preparing individuals who, more often than not, turn out to be their future employees. College students earn an income while they're in school, offsetting their own need for cash and lowering the amount of loan debt they're accumulating all while lining themselves up a future job opportunity. This win-win formula also means colleges are sending better prepared, work-savvy graduates into the job market -- simultaneously meeting area workforce demands and incentivizing graduates to live and work locally after graduation.

Several studies have indicated strong positive outcomes for co-op students. They achieve higher GPAs, because they are more engaged by seeing first-hand the tangible employment opportunities their coursework will open up. They are graduating on time and with less debt, because they have maintained an income and completed their degree on time. And 95 percent are offered a full-time job immediately following graduation, often at a higher-than-average starting salary, since they have already accrued work experience.

In New York, we are committed to bringing cooperative education to scale statewide with a program we call SUNY Works. It is underway at many of our 64 colleges already, and we recently received a \$500,000 grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York to support a statewide expansion. Already, our colleges have established partnerships with General Electric, IBM, Motorola, Global Foundries, and Chevron, to name a few.

According to Carnegie Corporation, their support for SUNY Works is a result of our 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)."

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The fact is, local businesses and the globally competitive innovation-driven companies of the 21st Century 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 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. 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 will give the nation a model for the future of college education and, in the meantime, serve our evolving mission as an economic driver.

Follow Nancy L. Zimpher on Twitter: [www.twitter.com/GenerationSUNY](http://www.twitter.com/GenerationSUNY)

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Pliska is the founder and executive director of The



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