Chancellor touts diversity, sustainability in state of SUNY speech

By ANNA GRONEWOLD | 01/31/2019 05:39 PM EST | Updated 01/31/2019 06:27 PM EST

ALBANY — New York’s state university system is increasingly a pathway to achieving economic equality and opportunity,
even as those values appear to be dwindling elsewhere in the country, Chancellor Kristina Johnson said Thursday.

“We all know that something is wrong with the American dream when income inequality is widening, when social mobility is lagging and our federal government is openly attacking those immigrants who believe in that dream so completely that they are willing to risk everything for it,” Johnson said at her second State of the University System speech in Albany.

With a nod to Gov. Andrew Cuomo’s “Justice Agenda” for the coming year, Johnson called higher education, especially at SUNY, the “only path” to opportunity because it “still levels the playing field for those who complete a degree at any level.”

“If you believe in the American dream, you believe in SUNY,” she said.

She teared up mentioning her grandmother, who left her family behind to emigrate to the United States from Ireland in 1908, calling her a “gutsy broad, let me tell you.”

“I just can’t imagine what that must have been like, because the pull to a better future was so strong,” she said later. “We have to rekindle that. And we have. And we are doing that in New York State.”

After visiting 54 campuses in the past year (there are 64 total), Johnson said the first issue she is prepared to address in 2019 is diversity. The demographics of SUNY faculty do not match the diversity of its students, Johnson said, and this year the system is embarking on a goal called PRODI-G (Promoting Recruitment, Opportunity, Diversity, Inclusion and Growth), allowing SUNY campuses to hire up to 1,000 early-to-mid-career professors over the next decade “who continue to meet persistent barriers in achieving certain careers.”

That includes underrepresented minorities and women in STEM disciplines. Buffalo State College will be the first campus to receive funding — a mix of private and state funds — for five new faculty members beginning in fall 2019. The campus will also begin developing a multi-disciplinary Africana Studies department.

SUNY is enhancing its online learning programs, which offer more than 500 degrees, and expanding its remedial support so students are better prepared to complete their first-year courses with so-called guided pathways, she said.
SUNY also has massive goals for sustainability, Design criteria for all new buildings will make them net-zero carbon, and 16 campuses have joined the 22-member New York Large Scale Renewable Energy Consortium to source their electricity from renewable sources. Because SUNY operates about 40 percent of the buildings owned by New York State, it is a key part of Cuomo’s Green New Deal, which aims to make New York's electricity 100 percent carbon-neutral by 2040.

SUNY’s Student Trustee and president of its Student Assembly, Michael Braun, said he is encouraged by the chancellor’s goals to enable more students to succeed through additional courses, pathways and opportunities, no matter their background.

The Legislature and governor have also indicated their support for diversity among SUNY students, Braun said, citing the New York DREAM Act recently passed in the Legislature. It would allow undocumented immigrants who arrived in the country as children to apply for college financial aid.

“I’m sure there are a lot of Dreamers in New York state that think about that on a day-to-day basis, and it impacts their academic journey,” Braun said. “By putting these issues at the forefront, providing financial aid for these students, it helps toward that individualized model to ensure they can pursue higher education.”