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Give SUNY And CUNY Control Over Their Own Tuition

If New York is to grow its way out of its economic and fiscal problems, it must take fuller advantage of all of its assets. One of its greatest - a network of public colleges and universities that reaches all parts of the State - has long been constrained by too many apron strings from Albany. SUNY and CUNY leaders need more latitude to enable them to develop our public universities into the first-class educational system that New Yorkers deserve and expect. A bill currently before the Legislature would accomplish this goal; it should be untangled from the protracted chaos surrounding the State budget and allowed a vote.

The Public Higher Education Empowerment and Innovation Act, submitted by Governor Paterson along with the 2010-11 Executive Budget and supported by many legislators, is key to improving the SUNY and CUNY systems. Although it contains many components, one of the most important is that it would correct irrational and inequitable tuition policies.

Although technically SUNY and CUNY already have the authority to set their own tuition rates, the State collects the tuition and the Legislature must appropriate the money in order for it to be spent. Thus, the Legislature has de facto control over tuition and could legally even spend it on something else. In hard times, cuts in general fund support for SUNY and CUNY are offset by boosting tuition. Thus, to help close the budget gap in 2009, tuition for undergraduates was increased by 14 percent at SUNY and 15 percent at CUNY, but the increases did not raise the amount of funding available to the institutions.

Similarly, during the recessions in 1995 and 2003, tuition was increased by 28 percent. In the good times of the mid-1980s, late 1990s, and mid-2000s, when there was no need to reduce state expenditures, tuition remained flat. Linking tuition policy with the State budget process means that some students finish their degrees without experiencing any change in tuition, while others face double-digit increases at times when they can least afford them. And the full amount

of tuition increases isn't used to invest in improving the quality of education for anyone.

The proposed bill would do the following:

1. Allow SUNY and CUNY to Set Tuition Rates. The bill gives full control over tuition rates to university officials and eliminates the requirement that the Legislature appropriate the funds.

Permitting the universities to raise tuition without legislative approval is likely to lead to more regular tuition hikes. But the increments would be more modest and predictable than those set by the Legislature. The proposal includes an annual cap on increases which would, for example, limit the maximum increase next year to \$500. In addition, SUNY and CUNY tuition is relatively low, undercutting the educational quality that New Yorkers receive.

Current SUNY and CUNY tuitions are far below the national average. In 2009-10, average tuition and fees for resident undergraduate students charged by New York's four-year public colleges and universities was \$5,761, 18 percent below the national average of \$7,020. Compared to 14 peer states with large public education systems, there are only three states that charge less for their four-year public schools than New York.

Out-of-state students are getting a particularly good deal. Out-of-state undergraduate tuition in 2009-10 of \$12,870 was 40 percent, or almost \$8,500, less than that at 29 comparable state universities. Among the 14 peer states, CUNY's out-of-state tuition and fees were the lowest for public four-year comprehensive colleges, and SUNY had the lowest out-of-state tuition and fees for research centers.

2. Allow SUNY and CUNY to Set Differential Tuition Among Campuses and Programs.

A differential tuition policy would allow the universities to recognize variation in costs among programs and campuses, and to maximize tuition revenue by taking into account market forces such as demand for programs and regional costs. It would also allow for better coverage of expenses. Science and engineering programs, for example, cost more than humanities programs due to lab and specialty faculty requirements. Many other large public systems have flagship schools and programs that are priced accordingly, and New York should be able to do the same.

Critics argue that higher tuition would make SUNY and CUNY inaccessible to students from low-income families. This concern should be addressed through financial aid to mitigate its impact on needy students. New York's Tuition Assistance Program, or TAP, is the most generous in the country, and it would be counterproductive to reduce TAP grants at the same time that increases in tuition are permitted.

New York's economic future depends on strengthening our public colleges and universities. The Public Higher Education Empowerment and Innovation Act should be separate from budget negotiations and passed immediately.

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