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Battling for Buffalo

At a time when most state leaders in New York are talking about cutting back, John Simpson sounds emboldened by comparison.

Simpson, president of the State University of New York’s Buffalo campus, says the state’s \$2 billion budget shortfall presents an opportunity. With a renewed sense of urgency, Simpson is pressing lawmakers to enact a series of reforms that would challenge longstanding traditions in New York. Simpson’s recommendations include allowing Buffalo, and perhaps a few other significant research campuses in the 64-campus system, to raise its tuition at a higher rate than the rest of the four-year SUNY campuses.

Tuition reforms have been trumpeted in Buffalo before, but Simpson says the often politically taboo subject has new resonance in a state where revenue is drying up. Buffalo is among the poorest cities in the increasingly poor state, and there’s growing community support for measures like tuition hikes that could bring jobs and development, he said

“It’s easier to push a conversation about this kind of substantive change today than it was a year or two ago, because the world wasn’t in such crisis,” Simpson said Tuesday.

Buffalo isn’t the only institution that sees some opportunity for tuition reform in the current economic climate. Robert Birgeneau, chancellor of the University of California at Berkeley, penned a [vision statement](#) that included a proposal to let individual campuses to set tuition as much as 25 percent above or below a mean tuition rate established by the regents.

Simpson is calling for annual tuition increases of 5 percent over the course of 10 years at Buffalo. Tuition and average fees at SUNY are \$5,479, which is below the national average of \$6,585 for four-year public universities, according to the [College Board](#).

Annual tuition increases as proposed by Simpson would be a remarkable shift for any institution in SUNY, which has only seen two tuition hikes in the last 13 years. In literature describing the plan, SUNY officials tout predictable tuition increases as a “rational” alternative to the “tuition roulette” that has been the standard in the state for decades.

Buffalo’s tuition proposal is one piece of a larger plan dubbed “[UB 2020](#),” which aims to grow the university’s 28,000-student enrollment by 10,000 students and increase faculty and staff numbers by 2,500.

SUNY Trustees Yet to Push Differential Tuition

The subject of differential tuition within SUNY has supporters outside of Buffalo as well. Indeed, a commission established by former Gov. Eliot Spitzer [embraced](#) the gradual implementation of differential increases across both SUNY and the City University of New York.

SUNY’s own Board of Trustees, however, has not made a hard push for differential tuition this year. Rather than push for elevated tuition for a few SUNY institutions, trustees are advocating an across-the-board hike. To that end, the board approved a measure in late November that would tie five years of future tuition increases to the [Higher Education Price Index](#), which would lead to a \$310 or 7 percent hike in the spring semester.



SUNY at Buffalo
John Simpson, president of SUNY at Buffalo, is pushing New York lawmakers to let his campus raise tuition at higher rates — something that’s historically been resisted.

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While the board's proposal would amount to a higher annual increase than Simpson has advocated in "UB 2020," it doesn't set higher rates for university centers. Carl T. Hagan, chairman of the SUNY board, said the board was more concerned with approving an immediate tuition increase than engaging in the "more nuanced" discussion about differential tuition.

"I think the differential tuition [proposal] is a much more nuanced debate, and I can certainly understand the frustrations of John Simpson and the other research university presidents at the failure of the political leadership to recognize the far greater costs associated with running a research institution," Hagan said. "But we've never succeeded in carrying the burden of persuasion on that score so far. I think in the not-distant future we will, but in the present climate it certainly was the view of the trustees that that particular debate might serve to obscure what is really the more urgent issue of the moment, and that is whether we can maintain the vitality [of SUNY]."

Simpson isn't so convinced, however, that SUNY trustees gain much by keeping their powder dry at this point.

"Do I understand [the board's position]? I can understand how they could get there. Would I handle things the same way? I don't think so," Simpson said. "I wouldn't want to let this opportunity pass by."

But the SUNY board's battle is about more than tuition hikes; it's about what happens after the increases are implemented. The board is urging lawmakers to allow SUNY to keep all of the money generated from tuition hikes, instead of having that money placed into the state general fund as has traditionally been the case.

Technically, SUNY trustees can approve all the tuition hikes they want, but it won't necessarily mean more money goes to the colleges. Legally, the Legislature has to appropriate the tuition revenues to SUNY institutions before it can be spent; Hagan said he was fully aware that approving the hike was just one step in a broader push to shape public opinion and influence the Legislature.

SUNY Leadership Questioned

Pushing any major agenda items forward in the current environment will be difficult, and not simply because New York faces a \$2 billion budget deficit. There is also a crisis of leadership in SUNY, according to many within the university. The SUNY board has been looking to replace the interim chancellor, John Clark, for more than a year, leaving a power vacuum at the highest levels, according to one senior-level SUNY official

"I think there's nobody that would not agree that the lack of a chancellor for more than a year is perceived as a serious disadvantage in these perilous times," said the official, who did not want to be identified speaking critically of the university's leadership.

Clark recently announced that he would resign by the end of the calendar year, but he was not forced out, according to Hagan. Clark had said from the beginning that he would only serve for six months, but he stayed on for 18 months to help SUNY, Hagan said.

"We just wore him out," Hagan said.

While he wasn't critical of Clark's leadership, Hagan acknowledged that having an interim chancellor presents inherent difficulties.

"We need a permanent chancellor," he said. "We feel that need profoundly, and we are working very hard at it, and we've been meeting with great frequency and talking to a lot of people."

Legislature Lukewarm to Idea

Differential tuition faces its own barriers in the Legislature. Assemblywoman Deborah Glick, who heads the state Assembly's Higher Education Committee, said she would not favor a proposal that would require students in their first two years of college to pay more at Buffalo or other university centers. Glick, a Democrat who is from Manhattan, said she might be more open to differential tuition in later undergraduate years, but would need to see the details of any such proposal before endorsing it.

"I just think the entering years, as freshmen and sophomores, I don't want ... students' early choices to be negatively impacted simply based on price," she said.

Sen. Kenneth P. LaValle, the Republican who most recently headed the Senate Higher Education Committee, did not respond

to an interview request. Under the newly established Democratic majority in the Senate, LaValle was recently forced to relinquish his chairmanship of the higher education committee. He is still a ranking member on the committee, however, and he has been lukewarm to the notion of differential tuition.

“I think pushing for differential tuition makes all sorts of logical sense,” said Shirley Strum Kenny, president of SUNY’s Stony Brook campus. “[But] I do not think it will happen, because I know many of the legislators are against it, including the [former] head of the higher education committee.”

SUNY’s 64 institutions, which enroll nearly 430,000 students across all of the state’s counties, vary greatly in mission and complexity. The four “university centers,” which include Buffalo, Stony Brook, Albany and Binghamton, are doctoral-granting research institutions that enroll about 20 percent of all the students in SUNY. But some of SUNY’s colleges enroll fewer than 5,000 students, in contrast to Buffalo, where more than 28,000 students are enrolled.

Despite the differences among SUNY institutions, there’s no difference in the tuition rates offered by the university centers, technology colleges and comprehensive colleges.

If New York approved differential tuition, it wouldn’t be the first state to do so in recent memory. Gov. Charlie Crist [approved](#) such a measure for three of the state’s 11 public universities last year. Crist, a Republican, had resisted the idea initially. Now faced with a fiscal crisis in Florida, however, Crist [recently approved](#) tuition hikes for all of the state’s public universities.

Leaders Question State Priorities

While tuition is an important issue, Kenny says she’s equally concerned that the state doesn’t allocate enough of its own funding to the research centers within SUNY. But there are political realities that make it hard to believe lawmakers would fund university centers at a higher rate if it meant having to close or cut the funding of some of the SUNY colleges with dwindling enrollments, she said.

“Every senator has a college in his or her district,” Kenny said. “The colleges are spread around into political areas and so everybody is going to protect his or her [college].”

The state’s decision to provide funding to some of New York’s private institutions is another sore spot for Kenny and Simpson, who head the two most prominent research campuses in SUNY. According to estimates from SUNY Stony Brook, private colleges received about \$42 million in state dollars, known as Bundy Aid, this year. Through the Tuition Assistance Program [TAP], the state also gives \$5,000 in financial aid to students who attend private colleges. Through TAP, students actually get more money for going to a private school than they would for going to a SUNY campus.

“It’s puzzling to me,” Simpson said, “why the state would continue to fund — substantially — private and church-related higher education at a time when they’re drastically reducing their underlying support of public higher education.”

— [Jack Stripling](#)

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