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Top schools should lead the way for SUNY

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This year, the State University of New York turns 60, a mere adolescent by the standards of public systems nationwide. SUNY enrolls more than 427,000 students on its 64 campuses, among them 40 percent of all New York state high school graduates. More than 2.4 million men and women have earned degrees from a SUNY institution, the majority of them New Yorkers who have remained here.

While strong in numbers, SUNY traditionally has lacked the resources and policy flexibility needed to make its quality match its size. Several reports have highlighted the chronic under-funding and over-regulation behind this reality. To compensate, SUNY has tried hard to stretch its resources, typically spreading them equally across its campuses. This has perpetuated a political culture that argues that permitting any campuses to be treated as leaders would unfairly punish the rest.

The most recent report, by Gov. Eliot Spitzer's Commission on Higher Education, acknowledges that this approach has simply held the entire system behind, denying the people of New York the enormous educational, economic, cultural and technological benefits that come from having a premier system led by one or more flagship campuses.

We believe strongly it is in the interest of both SUNY and the state to chart a new course, one that unleashes the enormous potential of our two largest and most comprehensive research campuses to create a modern knowledge-based economy for New York.

Governor Spitzer recognizes the need for a great state system with strong leaders. In his State of the State address in January, he announced that our respective institutions, Stony Brook University and the University at Buffalo, would serve as flagship institutions "for a world-class public university system."

There is now a broad consensus that strong research universities are essential for states and nations to be competitive in the 21st century. Given the tremendous appetite and need for public higher education in New York, we have a moral obligation to ensure that our public institutions are every bit as strong as those of other states, such as California, Michigan and Texas.

The Legislature is now considering a number of promising proposals to do just that, including adding faculty, improving aging facilities and limiting the portion of family income spent on tuition. The governor has proposed creating a dedicated revenue stream for public higher education by unlocking value from the state's lottery. We believe action on these proposals is critical.

For New York to lead globally, it needs all of the top research universities it can get, public and private. But it also needs to identify and support the public institutions that have the greatest potential to transform New York's economy in the way that, say, the University of California Berkeley and the University of Washington have in their states.

There are many strong campuses within SUNY. Among these, the University at Buffalo and Stony Brook University exhibit the characteristics of public flagships: size, breadth, quality of schools and programs, and large research portfolios. Notably, our institutions are New York's only public members of the prestigious Association of American Universities, which comprises the top 62 research institutions in North America.

Unleashing the potential of our system and its flagships will necessitate making tough but wise choices. Securing resources is necessary, but far from sufficient. We have to shift our perspectives in three critical ways.

First, we must envision public education not simply as an individual benefit to students, but as a public good worthy of public investment.

Second, we should embrace the idea that differentially supporting our lead institutions is not a value judgment. It's strategically smart. And it will lift all boats, leading to greater strength and support for the entire system.

Finally, New York is unusual in the amount of public money it puts into private colleges and universities. In other states, with similarly strong private college traditions, the counterparts of these institutions flourish with little or no state support. Such support is an admirable contribution to education, but if we are to be economically competitive with other states, it cannot come at the expense of properly supporting public institutions.

It's time to act; the Commission on Higher Education has shown the way. The high profile of public higher education in Albany this year provides a forum for New Yorkers to embrace changes that will benefit our state for generations to come. A major component of that agenda should be supporting our flagships as sites of educational excellence, discovery and impact.

The reason is clear: These institutions will strengthen SUNY as a whole, and will fuel the cultural, technological and economic development that is key to our state's future health. To compete in today's world, New York must acknowledge and support its flagship campuses. Now.

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