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EDITORIALS

UB plan for more autonomy deserves support

Giving university more flexibility would preserve the UB 2020 plan

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When Franklin Roosevelt was sworn in as president of the United States, he promised “bold, persistent experimentation” to counter the economic and psychological forces of the Great Depression.

Three quarters of a century later, as the nation and the state grapple with another severe recession, it is time once again to seek new answers to old questions. Specifically, state legislators and the governor should approve a bill that would grant the University at Buffalo greater freedom to chart its own course. The reasons are many.

The main advantage of Assembly and Senate bills 2020 — artfully named to mirror the UB 2020 expansion program — is that their proposed changes won’t cost Albany anything, yet they will help Western New York’s largest university thrive as state support for education comes under increased economic pressure.

Furthermore, the authority that UB would gain from the changes would do nothing more than to bring the university in line with the freedoms of research universities in other states. Finally, the changes could function as a pilot program for the entire SUNY system, allowing the officials of the state and the university to evaluate their impact.

The legislation includes four main components. It would allow the university to:

- Raise tuition on its own. UB is looking for a “rational tuition policy” that would provide small, regular tuition increases and go directly to UB, not to state coffers.
- Lease and sell land, freeing the campus to negotiate with private developers interested in building projects on campus.
- Borrow money through bonds from an entity like the state Dormitory Authority or a local industrial development agency to build some of the residential, commercial and retail projects in the campus master plan.
- Buy goods and services without requiring state approval. Existing policies force unnecessary delays in projects and drive up costs.

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All of these are sensible moves, meant to bolster the state university system's marquee campus. No doubt, the proposals will generate debate, especially regarding tuition rates. Yet, on that subject, university officials make a compelling argument. Tuition increases will be used only for the university's educational needs and for financial aid to students. Meanwhile, they say, small regular increases of the sort they envision would have produced a lower tuition than what will result if the governor's pitch for a \$620 increase is accepted.

These changes will help protect the visionary UB 2020 plan at a time when it could be undermined by the state's financial crisis. That plan, virtually everyone agrees, is crucial to the region's economic prospects. Western New York's legislators, led in this by Assemblyman Robin Schimminger and Sen. William T. Stachowski, will have their hands full convincing lawmakers in both chambers to pass this bill, but they need to work hard at it, and then to persuade the governor to sign it.

Although the changes are significant from a New York perspective, they are well within national norms and they could make a huge difference here.

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