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Obstinate senator helps fix Albany

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The state legislature can't complete work on the now 110-day-late budget because a Democratic senator from Buffalo won't vote for a bill raising new revenues unless the other Democrats agree to deregulate tuition at the State University of New York system. Is this another example of Albany dysfunction? No, it's one of the most hopeful signs that legislators might actually begin representing the interests of their constituents.

The issue is an important one. The sprawling university and college system has been hamstrung by micromanaging from the Legislature, which has decreed that every school charge identical tuition and follow state-mandated procedures on everything from purchasing to hiring. Since this is New York, ridiculous things happen. Tuition remains unchanged in economically good years because the state has money, and it is raised sharply in bad times when students can afford it the least. In recent years, the actual tuition increases have been funneled to the state treasury, which takes a cut for other programs before passing the money back to the universities. Think something needs to be done?

Gov. David Paterson, at the urging of SUNY's new chancellor (and following in the footsteps of Eliot Spitzer), proposed giving SUNY universities the right to set their own tuition and keep what they generate. It would result in higher revenue for the centers most in demand. With the state unable to offer new money, this is the only way SUNY's top centers can compete with rivals across the nation.

Assembly Democrats have said no way. They argue this would be unfair to students, who should be able to pick a school without financial considerations. What legislators won't face up to is the fact that their approach has led to mediocrity. Fewer New Yorkers attend state schools than in such places as California, Michigan, Illinois or North Carolina. The top students in those states vie to go to Berkeley, Ann Arbor, Champaign or Chapel Hill even if they can afford to go elsewhere. Top New York students go to private schools unless they just can't pay for them.

Assembly Democrats, heavily dominated by New York City liberals, are also engaged in a war on upstate. The city has Columbia and NYU to spur its higher-education sector. Buffalo has only its university to remake its entire economy. In fact, SUNY is the one option for reviving upstate that stands any chance of success.

Those are the policy fundamentals. Here are the politics. Once the leadership has decided an issue, legislators fall in line. What Bill Stachowski of Buffalo is accomplishing—with an assist from Neil Breslin and Brian Foley—is to make it clear that what his constituents want matters most. And that's a very promising development.

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