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The Accidental Giant of Higher Education

By PETER APPLEBOME

NANCY L. ZIMPHER, the new chancellor of the [State University of New York](#), is a woman with a plan. From 1998 to 2003, when she was chancellor of the [University of Wisconsin](#), Milwaukee, it was "The Milwaukee Idea." From 2003 to May 2009, when she was president of the [University of Cincinnati](#), it was "UC/21."

And for much of this year, Dr. Zimpher has been crisscrossing New York State, PowerPoint engaged, promoting "The Power of SUNY," with its pragmatic and somewhat buzzy bullet points — "SUNY and the Entrepreneurial Century," "SUNY and the Seamless Education Pipeline," "SUNY and the World" — about the university as economic and community-building engine for tough times. Dr. Zimpher is somewhat famous in higher education as a tireless and creative marketer.

"I have to say that if you planted me on Mars, this is what I would try to do," she said a few weeks back, after spending the morning touting "The Power of SUNY" to the staff of the Research Foundation, which administers more than \$1 billion in university research funds. She then swore in a new student representative to SUNY's board of trustees, positively beaming when, without prodding, the student put her hand on the "Power of SUNY" brochure, in lieu of a Bible, in reciting her oath.

"My belief is that to move an organization forward you have to have a common, comprehensive and ambitious agenda," Dr. Zimpher said. "It has to be aspirational. It has to move you. I think the full manifestation of SUNY is underexposed and underexploited. If people really knew and understood the difference these campuses make in their communities they would be amazed."

But a funny — and absurdly unlikely — thing happened on Dr. Zimpher's way to revamping and rebranding SUNY, the unloved colossus that is the biggest comprehensive system of public higher education in the country. The empowerment legislation that was the companion piece for the plan — giving campuses greater autonomy, including the ability to

set their own tuitions — became the pivotal, ferociously contested boulder in the road in New York's seemingly endless budget impasse (which at press time remained unresolved).

Of the two most powerful men in Albany, one, Gov. [David A. Paterson](#), who proposed the legislation, insisted that it be part of a deal tied to the state's 2010-11 budget. The other, Assembly Speaker [Sheldon Silver](#), was adamant that it never would be.

On one level, this has been a classic case of the warring duchies of Albany, of how an educational issue morphs into a political power struggle. But its issues are both distinctly national and parochial. On the one hand, it provides a condensed glimpse of many of the issues roiling public higher education nationally: access versus status, state control versus campus control, universities as centers of disinterested scholarship versus universities as economic engines, rising demand versus falling revenues. On the other, it is the latest and most conspicuous chapter in a battle over turf, money and, oh yes, education that began 62 years ago, when New York State reluctantly approved a system that has gone on to become the accidental giant of American higher education.

TWO things define the State University of New York. It's huge. And compared to its public peers, it's weird.

The numbers suggest a system that's borderline unmanageable — 64 campuses, 7,660 degree programs, 88,000 faculty members, 465,000 students, a \$10.7 billion budget, a campus within 20 miles of 97 percent of the state's population. Many of its campuses are anchors of farflung small communities that only locals could find on a map — Fredonia, Delhi, Cobleskill, Potsdam. People know some campuses by reputation but not that they're part of SUNY — [Fashion Institute of Technology](#) in Manhattan, Maritime College in the Bronx, and the colleges of agriculture and life sciences, human ecology, veterinary medicine, and industrial and labor relations at Cornell. Four are ambitious university centers with a national reputation: Stony Brook, Buffalo, Binghamton and Albany. Thirty are community colleges.

In a brand-name culture, SUNY is an awfully hard brand to define, especially when it's still often thought of as an upstate phenomenon in a state whose center of gravity is south in New York City and its suburbs.

But another reason that SUNY has struggled to forge an identity is because that was the idea from the start. New York was the last of the populous states to form a university system. SUNY was not founded until 1948 and over the strenuous objections of the state's powerful private colleges and universities. And it began with the stipulation that it would only “supplement” the private institutions and not compete with them. State legislators

established an unfriendly board of regents and imposed the nation's strictest regulations on what the university could do. An informal prohibition on raising private funds meant that New York's state universities for decades grew without the endowments that supported campuses elsewhere. No wonder that a study in 1960 called SUNY a "limping and apologetic enterprise."

Virtually alone in the country, there was (and still is) no flagship institution, no Madison, Berkeley or Austin to provide a network of loyal supporters for years to come, no beloved Buckeyes, Huskies or Gators to create a common wellspring of good will. (SUNY's most conspicuous attempt to play in that league — Binghamton's one trip to the [N.C.A.A. Division I](#) basketball tournament in 2009 — ended in scandal, with arrests of several players, accusations of preferential treatment for athletes and the implosion of the program.) Add in that the [City University of New York](#) was there to suck up all the energy and attention for public education in the most populous and influential part of the state, and SUNY has been climbing uphill since its inception.

It prospered in flush times under Nelson Rockefeller but has been under siege of late. State and SUNY leaders repeatedly debate its mission, including the question of whether it could be seen as a great university system without its own Berkeley or the [University of Virginia](#).

Still, not many of the moments has been more challenging than this one.

Since 2000, SUNY has had five interim, acting or full chancellors. It faces a budget meltdown with no bottom in sight, having lost \$634 million in state support over the past three years. Those cuts come amid steadily growing demand for its services. Enrollment has increased by 25,000 over the past year, and even the downstate suburbanites who are most receptive to the appeal of private universities are taking long looks at the state's public ones as well.

It's true that on college message boards and in admissions buzz, SUNY doesn't get much love. "Maryland, Virginia, Pennsylvania and Ohio all have excellent state flagships and are close to the northeastern private colleges. Where did NY go wrong?" wrote one posting in March on the Web site College Confidential.

But almost all the SUNY campuses are seeing rising numbers of applicants as price and practicality loom larger than the perceived brand on the rear-window decal. Maybe in good times you didn't think twice about spending \$50,000 a year for Lehigh or Colgate instead of \$20,000 for comparable educations at Binghamton or Geneseo, but that has never been an option for people of limited means, and increasingly it's not an option for many of the affluent, either.

Enter “The Power of SUNY,” the result of Dr. Zimpher’s **Hillary Clinton**-style listening tour of all 64 campuses, an exhaustive series of meetings across the state and a 200-member task force.

To be honest, the strategic plan is more broad statements of intent than nuts and bolts. But the plan, and the legislation meant to help put it into effect, reflect both the problems of the moment and SUNY’s historical challenges. To address the former, Dr. Zimpher’s plan, to the chagrin of many of SUNY’s professors, is more about building the state’s economy than it is about the traditional educational missions of higher education. “There is a growing and welcome recognition that in a knowledge economy, institutions of higher education can — and must — be pivotal in generating growth and revitalizing communities,” it begins.

There is talk of research but research translated into tangible, measurable results — more patents issued, more grants won, more jobs created. SUNY StartUP is a program to invite entrepreneurs onto campuses to act as mentors. SUNY-INC (Incent New Companies) is supposed to link researchers at different campuses and companies in a development chain designed to speed up the process from concept to commercialization. SUNY is supposed to bring doctors, nurses and teachers to underserved urban and rural neighborhoods, and create a wellness network to establish statewide health goals and programs in areas like obesity, smoking cessation and the prevention of chronic disease. It is supposed to do groundbreaking research in renewable energy and work with the state’s Smart Grid Consortium to drive down energy costs.

To Dr. Zimpher, who grew up on a small farm near the town of Gallipolis, Ohio, the daughter of educators, it’s a powerful statement of what SUNY can do for New York and an inducement for state support.

“We don’t really have an economic development plan for the State of New York, but if we did, it would look a lot like ‘The Power of SUNY,’ ” she said.

Her supporters say this is absolutely the right time to enunciate a vision that defines SUNY. “New York north and west of Albany is a disaster area, even great cities like Rochester, so it’s entirely appropriate to say the university has a mission beyond educating students,” said Gerald Benjamin, a professor of political science at SUNY New Paltz. “It’s very important to have a plan while you’re struggling to keep the ship afloat, so your plan isn’t simply to keep the ship afloat.”

To many others, the plan has some good points but reflects a system in danger of forgetting its core mission of providing opportunity to students regardless of economic status. “The strategic plan doesn’t talk about educational missions, it doesn’t talk about affordability or

accessibility, there's very little about undergraduate education and keeping it affordable and accessible," said Phillip H. Smith, president of the powerful United University Professions union, which represents more than 34,000 academic and professional faculty members. "It reflects an attempt to corporatize the university."

Those issues and many others came to a head this summer in the debate over the plan's companion piece, the clunky-sounding Public Higher Education Empowerment and Innovation Act, giving SUNY and CUNY greater control over tuition, purchasing and public-private partnerships. Governor Paterson wants tuition-setting taken out of the state budget process, where it's forever at the mercy of the state's fiscal gyrations and where tuition increases go to Albany and often stay there. Instead, different campuses would establish different tuitions, with caps and added financial aid to cushion the blow to access.

To advocates, the effort to break the shackles that SUNY was born with has long been overdue. For the largest SUNY campus, the [University at Buffalo](#), such self-determination is an essential part of its ambitious growth plan, "UB 2020," which local officials say would create thousands of jobs, expand the campus to downtown and foster new ventures with industry.

Samuel L. Stanley Jr., president of [Stony Brook University](#), said increased revenue from the legislation could enable the hiring of 400 new faculty members over the next decade. And Stony Brook's most generous donor, the hedge fund manager [James Simons](#), has made a pledge of as much as \$150 million, contingent on the passage of some form of the legislation.

But a prestigious flagship or a brand-name research university to some is a quasi-private school with unaffordable tuition to others. Critics in the union, the Assembly and the universities other than the largest research institutions see in this a new, tiered SUNY with higher tuition and campuses perceived to be better for those who can afford them and ones perceived as inferior for those who cannot.

Henry Steck, who teaches political science at SUNY Cortland and has written on SUNY's history, wrote to his colleagues during the height of the budget battles last month that if the legislation passed in its current form, "I believe we will face the end of SUNY as we know it." He added: "SUNY will move dramatically toward a 'privatized' university and SUNY will be (like UVa or UVt) 'public' more or less in name only in terms of its financial support. ... It would be as if we moved the cost of our K-12 public schools to the children and their families, with 'aid' for poor families."

What SUNY should be doing, many of these critics say, is fighting for adequate financing and affordable tuition, not looking for higher tuition and private sources that will inevitably sap

resources from the public contributions while expecting something in return. “If we look at the public-private partnerships the university has entered into in the past, we see that not only have they not brought significant and continuing dollars into the university, but instead have caused a long-term drain on university revenues and financial resources,” said Dr. Smith, the union president. “My question is, Why is now any different than the past?”

That’s a good question. And increasingly the answer seems to be: It’s different because it’s different. The way public higher education has traditionally been supported no longer seems to be working. Until 1963, SUNY had free tuition. Three decades ago, the state bore about 80 percent of the cost of running SUNY. Now it’s more like 30 percent.

And it’s not just SUNY. Books about public higher education these days have titles like “Saving Alma Mater: A Rescue Plan for America’s Public Universities,” by James C. Garland, and “Saving State U: Fixing Public Higher Education,” by Nancy Folbre. Both argue that the economic trends buffeting public higher education will continue with state budgets under a long-term siege and other expenses — elementary and secondary education, health care, prisons — deemed more critical and less discretionary.

“The business model of higher education that has worked for a century isn’t working anymore, and it needs to change,” said Dr. Garland, a former colleague of Dr. Zimpher at [Ohio State](#) and the former president of Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. “Is New York going to be able to meet the financial needs of future students? The answer is no. The money just isn’t there. None of the forces depleting state resources are going away, and it’s wishful thinking to think government can find the money to fund campuses at the level they once did.”

So maybe the new face of SUNY was the scene at its headquarters in May. That was when Mike Russo, director of government relations and regulatory affairs for Globalfoundries, a leading semiconductor manufacturer, was meeting with SUNY officials about the training and personnel needs of the \$4.3 billion plant under construction near Albany. The plant is expected to create 1,400 technology jobs in its first phase, with perhaps more to come. Mr. Russo says the company is working not just with nearby community colleges and the nanotechnology institute at SUNY Albany, but also with the chancellor’s office to identify potential workers throughout the SUNY system.

“Educational institutions are very parochial by nature,” he said. “They want to sell you their wares. It’s the survival of the fittest. In order to change that you need more than a strategic plan; they’re a dime a dozen. You need leadership that makes everyone feel they have a stake in it. And I tell you that’s happened with SUNY over the past seven months.”

CHANCES are SUNY will never be reducible to a single brand. It's too many things to too many people with too many competing interests: to be accessible and to be elite, to be intellectual centers and to be job creators, to serve their communities and to (belatedly) compete with private universities that are its neighbors.

Still, if there's no single beloved campus, for some the hope remains that SUNY can morph into something more than the sum of its parts, though it's not clear whether the more tiered system that autonomy seems to foster would help the system build a common identity or blur it further.

"A lot of us still want New Yorkers to think of SUNY as their university, a part of our patrimony, like [Ole Miss](#) or the Texas Aggies," Dr. Steck said.

But then patrimony and the tug of the heart may be luxuries in the current Darwinian educational world. So despite the bruising battles this year, Dr. Zimpher is betting that in hard times, SUNY can find the identity its founders were half-heartedly groping toward six decades ago. "We are the growth engine for New York," she said. "We will yield a return on that investment and eventually enhance the taxpayers' ability to grow ourselves out of this deficit. Cut the engine loose, and let it do what it will for New York."

Peter Applebome writes the Our Towns column for The Times.