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University at Buffalo President John Simpson, left, and State Sen. William Stachowski have championed the university act.

Harry Scull Jr./Buffalo News file photo

## Pass SUNY reform

### Legislators need to push hard to pass university system plan

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As Albany approaches its piecemeal adoption of the 2010-11 state budget, the twin fates of SUNY and the Western New York economy hang in the balance. Prospects for passage of a bill that would give the SUNY system greater independence appear iffy, but that worrisome fact merely calls for supporters to increase their efforts on behalf of the Public Higher Education Empowerment and Innovation Act.

The measure, which would allow campuses to set their own tuition rates and encourage partnerships with private companies, has broad support around the state but runs into a hotbed of opposition in one key constituency: Democrats in the State Assembly.

Opposition is centered downstate, where members say they fear the change will make a SUNY education too expensive for constituents who cannot afford anything but the state's public university system. We doubt that is true, but even if it is a legitimate issue, legitimate issues can have solutions that don't require abandoning an entire reform package.

This one, long in the planning, is urgent. Not only will it bring SUNY in line with other state universities, but it will simultaneously help to charge the economy upstate. In Western New York, the legislation is key to the University at Buffalo's growth plan, known as UB 2020. Supporters say it could create thousands of jobs, expand the campus to downtown and produce new ventures with private businesses.

What is more, this is something that Albany can help accomplish without spending any of the state's increasingly precious tax dollars. Facing a \$9.2 billion deficit and already punishing its residents with high costs, Albany cannot responsibly increase spending or taxes. What it urgently needs to do is to spark upstate's economy and to support higher education in New York. The SUNY reform plan can accomplish all of these goals.

Downstate representatives, we believe, often forget that upstate's economic weakness is their

constituents' liability. Upstaters' periodic complaints about the downstate money pit notwithstanding, the fact is that upstate consumes more in state resources than it provides.

That is to say, downstate taxpayers are subsidizing upstate's demand for services. They have a significant, if largely unrecognized, interest in changing that dynamic. The SUNY reform bill can also help to achieve that mutually beneficial goal.

These changes rest in the hands of the State Legislature, and particularly the Assembly. The Senate and the governor's office are already behind this proposal. So are SUNY's campus presidents, the system's chancellor, a statewide students group, a building trades union, business groups and local government officials across the state.

The Assembly needs to bear down on this issue. This is no time for politics as usual, but for state government to take off its blinders, see the landscape for what it really is, and act. Upstate is counting on this. It needs to happen. This year.



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