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UB President John Simpson feels the debate in Albany has not been focused on the merits.

John Hickey / News file photo

SUNY's fate hinges on votes in Assembly

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ALBANY — It's make or break time for the state university system and its sweeping plans to untether itself from Albany.

The University at Buffalo was the first to push the initiative, which would change how tuition levels are set, permit individual campuses to keep more of the tuition money and encourage partnerships with private companies.

State budget talks appear to be entering a final phase this coming week, and whether this vision lives or dies hinges on those negotiations.

One thing is certain: The fate of the university plan is in the hands of the Assembly, where downstate and upstate Democrats are fighting each other over a measure that State University of New York officials say is desperately needed to bolster both the reputation and educational offerings of the nation's largest university system.

For Western New York, the measure represents the region's single biggest request at the Capitol. The measure's outcome will determine whether UB can go again with its ambitious growth plan — known as “UB 2020” — that local officials say could create thousands of jobs, expand the campus to downtown and foster new ventures with private industry.

Widespread backing

The plan has widespread backing, including from Gov. David A. Paterson, Democrats who lead the State Senate, SUNY campus presidents and the chancellor, a statewide students group, a building trade union, and business groups and local government officials from Long Island to Buffalo.

But the measure is stuck where it has been for months: on life support in the Assembly.

Advocates fear their leverage will be lost this year if they don't get it inserted into the 2010 state budget.

Besides a union representing 34,000 SUNY employees, the most outspoken critic is the influential head of the Assembly higher education committee, Deborah Glick. She says the plan will change SUNY's mission by reducing access for lower-income students while relaxing needed oversight of the campuses.

"This was not the year," Glick said of the SUNY bill, adding that a majority of Democrats who run the Assembly oppose the legislation.

"The time and energy that has been put into what we early on signaled were items that were not acceptable was a misuse of everyone's time and energy. I think that we were very frank early on that there were substantial disagreements to bridge," the Manhattan Democrat said.

Other Democratic lawmakers say Glick's obituary of the bill is premature.

"I think just the opposite of Assemblywoman Glick. I think the prospects are good," said Assemblywoman Crystal Peoples-Stokes, a Buffalo Democrat. She said the measure has not yet been privately discussed with Assembly Democrats and predicted Assembly opposition will cave if the Senate and Paterson insist that the initiative be a part of the budget.

But control — more precisely, giving up control — is at the heart of the opposition, backers say.

The plan would permit annual tuition hikes based on an inflation index and let the four major SUNY campuses — including UB — create a "differential" tuition to charge more than a smaller campus. The hikes would require SUNY board approval.

Debate over tuition

Presently, the state Legislature must first give the OK for any tuition hikes.

"What they think is the only way to get a good public education is for the Legislature to have control over what the tuition is. And I think just the opposite," Peoples-Stokes said. "I think the Legislature has undermined the ability of the institutions to grow academically because it has controlled tuition."

Critics worry over what they call the privatization of SUNY, which they say would happen if tuition levels were taken out of the state budget process and campuses set up ventures with companies intent on making a profit more than educating students.

"We are so far from being a private university that it seems almost silly to bring up a concern like that," said UB President John Simpson.

The debate in Albany has not been focused on the merits, Simpson said, noting the SUNY campuses plan to set aside a certain portion of revenues from the higher tuition for scholarships for low-income students.

Plus, SUNY is a relative bargain compared to public universities in other states.

But Glick said that, had SUNY gotten its way five years ago, tuition would have been nearly double this past year's level of \$4,970. She also said SUNY refuses to address the mandatory fees imposed on

students that have risen sharply the past decade.

But SUNY's tuition, on average, has been rising at sharply higher levels than the inflation rate already.

Since 1990, when tuition was \$1,350, SUNY tuition has gone up 280 percent — or 14 percent, on average, per year.

Beyond adopting a “rational” tuition policy, the Public Higher Education Empowerment and Innovation Act would make it easier for SUNY colleges to sell land to private companies, enter into business deals and partnerships on everything from research to operating a dorm.

The legislation “is about liberating them ... [and] giving them the opportunity to provide the resources for their students so we can become a part of global industry and a part of the new economy,” Paterson said.

Critics offer no alternatives to improve the 63-campus system, which has more than 450,000 students, SUNY officials say.

Instead, the state deficit is poised to hit UB with \$56 billion in state aid cuts this year and last year.

At the United University Professions, the union representing SUNY professors, librarians, admissions counselors and others, there is a concern that the bill would let the state weaken its financial commitment to SUNY. They also have concerns about setting different tuition levels from the smaller ones.

Labor protection key

Also, one of the union's major concerns involves publicprivate partnerships, said its president, Phillip H. Smith. He worries that the oversight mechanism for such deals is weak at best, and that there is a long line of failed partnerships with SUNY colleges. Moreover, he said New York could see what has happened in some other states or at private colleges where faculty end up being controlled by a corporation paying for a research project.

And will these new publicprivate partnership employees have union protections? he asks.

A true oversight board to address these partnerships would ease the unions' objections, he said.

The union backs many of the bill's provisions, such as the new annual, inflation-based tuition policy.

“There's an awful lot of the empowerment act we find compelling,” Smith said, “but we have to dig our heels in on the labor protections.”

UB officials have signaled that their ambitious UB 2020 growth plans will not happen without the new empowerment act. That plan calls for greatly expanding its Buffalo presence by relocating its five health science schools to downtown, which it says will create nearly 7,000 jobs.

If the broader plan fails, local advocates say, state lawmakers should carve out UB and maybe another of the big campus centers, perhaps Stony Brook, and let them try it as a pilot program.

Peoples-Stokes is upset that the measure is being blocked by her downstate colleagues, who she said do not have SUNY schools in their districts. And arguments over tuition are disingenuous, she says, because the current system leaves students clueless when the next big tuition hit will come.

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