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editorial

Flexibility for all of SUNY

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Photo credit: Photo by John Dunn | Stony Brook University

The ultimate solutions to the problems facing the State University of New York must not be about just one campus. So a bill that passed the State Senate Wednesday, to help only the University at Buffalo, misses the mark.

Nationwide, as state funding shrinks, public universities are seeking more autonomy to make their own way. The 64-campus SUNY system has long sought, for example, more flexibility to make purchases and to create public-private partnerships that drive economic development. Perhaps most difficult to achieve, it needs a predictable tuition system. And SUNY must get to keep the proceeds of any increases; the state has to stop grabbing those dollars for other purposes.

As to Buffalo's political-theater bill, UB 2020 for short, it arose from a laudable local effort to deal with a broken economy. But it gives only Buffalo the kind of flexibility that the whole system needs. It would put Stony Brook University at a disadvantage. The idea came up last year but did not become law. Now the Senate Republicans gave their politically vulnerable Buffalo delegation a chance to vote yes on this year's bill. That's a start to the debate, but any flexibility bill that passes the Assembly must also help Stony Brook - and the Island's other SUNY campuses.

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In 2010, SUNY Chancellor Nancy [Zimpher](#) tried to reach all the major goals in one bill. This year, she's not backing down, but recalibrating. Sen. [Kenneth LaValle](#) (R-Port Jefferson), chairman of the Higher Education Committee, thinks it's best to do the procurement and public-private partnerships separately and soon, and only then approach the knotty tuition issue. He and Zimpher appear to be on the same page on this strategy.

The reason tuition is so knotty is that lawmakers don't want anyone else, like SUNY's Board of Trustees, to set it. But the legislature has not handled it well. Many students have graduated with no tuition increases; others have faced double-digit spikes.

Last year's SUNY flexibility bill proposed allowing tuition to rise along with a higher education index. That got little support. Now SUNY is working on a plan that would let families know exactly what tuition will be for the next five years. It will almost certainly avoid any increase this year, because neither Gov. Andrew M. [Cuomo](#) nor lawmakers will buy it.

Zimpher wisely wants to partner with Cuomo, and they both see SUNY as a vital economic development force. But the relationship faces challenges, notably the governor's troubling proposal to eliminate state support for SUNY hospitals, including the entire \$55 million that the state gives Stony Brook's hospital to provide services too costly for other hospitals to handle.

The chancellor has a tough balancing act: pushing back on those cuts, while still showing Cuomo she understands his deficit problems. She must also work with LaValle on a tuition plan that really helps Stony Brook and other campuses thrive. If that delicate dance had to begin with the two-step on UB 2020, so be it. But that can't be the final word. SUNY's needs are real, urgent and statewide. hN

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