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EDITORIALS

Don't cripple universities

State plan to limit spending authority improperly sequesters collected funds

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The tuition, fees and room and board charges paid by students at the various campuses of the State University of New York should properly be spent providing those students with classes, teachers, laboratories, beds and meals. Using any portion of that money to help the state bail itself out of another budget jam is unconscionable, and ought to be illegal.

Yet there the state is, sequestering \$109 million in funds that by rights belong to the SUNY system, not because it should, but because it can.

Unless Gov. David A. Paterson quickly reverses field on this, the resulting loss of revenue to the state's public university system will do more than diminish the quality of education the students (and their long-suffering parents) have paid for. It will also seriously undermine the ability of those schools — and particularly the University at Buffalo — to become the very brain-powered economic engine the state so badly needs.

Technically, all money that is collected by any state agency— SUNY included— belongs not to that agency, but to the state. Like all other state funds, that revenue cannot be spent until it is allocated by the Legislature and the governor. In theory, it makes sense that no state agency — SUNY included — should be allowed to spend its money with no legislative oversight. The potential for mismanagement and empire- building is just too great.

But these days, with the governor looking under every sofa cushion he can find to try to make up budget deficits that threaten to top \$20 billion over the next three years, the state's control over university revenue threatens to cease being useful oversight and become outright theft.



The SUNY system was already dunned 3.35 percent of its state taxpayer subsidy, amounting to about \$38.7 million less in operating funds for the 2008-09 academic year. That's the same percentage cut that was imposed on all state agencies as the result of recession-fueled deficits, and a reasonable sharing of the burden.

But to then hold back the same 3.35 percent of the university system's tuition and fee income — the \$109 million now in question — is not fair. And it is particularly unwise, especially for Buffalo and Western New York.

The state is in such dire fiscal trouble because its economy, disproportionately dependent on the whims of Wall Street, is sputtering. While spending restraints are thus in order, the long-term answer is to boost, and diversify, the economy. And the best way for the state to encourage that is to provide a world-class educational system, all the way from pre-K to Ph. D. It would help a lot more than relatively puny property tax rebates or questionably targeted business grants.

The dream of UB President John B. Simpson to enlarge not only his school's enrollment, but also its potential to attract top-flight faculty and researchers — and not only in its medical facilities — is both the most realistic and the most far-reaching plan to regenerate the economic future of the region.

The state's plan to cut UB's budget by \$16 million threatens not only to curtail Simpson's dreams, but also to force cuts in existing programs and classes. If that happened, the real economic loss to the state would be much more than any savings the governor's budget office could find.

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