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Give SUNY and CUNY More Control of Tuition

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Governor Andrew Cuomo will convene a summit later this month of New York's higher education and political leaders to consider a proposal by the State University of New York (SUNY) at Buffalo to give the university greater autonomy with respect to its tuition policies and control over its physical assets. This is an important proposal that deserves support -- not just for SUNY at Buffalo but for all public higher education institutions in New York.

While enhancement of the ability of public colleges to manage their physical assets is important, the key issue for the summit is tuition policy. Currently the state legislature has de facto control over tuition rates, and this leads to two serious problems.

First, erratic and sharp tuition increases historically coincide with periods of hard economic times. The legislature has been reluctant to increase tuition in good times, and then imposes large increases in tight budget times. From the students' perspective, this means some face double-digit tuition increases at times when they can least afford them, while others finish their degrees without experiencing any change in tuition at all.

Second, tuition revenue is not necessarily allocated by the legislature to improve the quality of higher education. In this year's budget cycle, for instance, the legislature [diverted City University of New York \(CUNY\) tuition revenue](#), refusing to appropriate \$40 million stemming from a five percent tuition increase that was approved by CUNY's Board of Trustees, but not by the legislature.

Allowing the universities to raise tuition without legislative approval could well lead to more regular tuition hikes, but the increments would be more modest and predictable than those set by the legislature. And the increases would not make SUNY and CUNY comparatively expensive.

In 2010-11, average tuition and fees for resident undergraduate students charged by New York's four-year public colleges and universities was \$5,790, [nearly a quarter below the national average](#) of \$7,605, and half the amount charged in neighboring New Jersey. Among the 14 peer states with large public education systems, New York's four-year public schools charge the third-lowest tuition and fees behind only North Carolina and Florida.

Out-of-state students get an even better deal. SUNY's out-of-state undergraduate tuition -- \$12,870 in 2009-10 -- [was almost \\$8,500 less](#) than the average out-of-state tuition at 29 comparable state universities. Among the 14 peer states, CUNY's out-of-state tuition and fees were the lowest for public four-year comprehensive colleges, and SUNY had the lowest out-of-state tuition and fees for research centers.

SUNY and CUNY should also be allowed to set differential tuition among campuses and programs. Currently, variation is permitted only between senior and community colleges within each system, and between graduate and undergraduate programs at each system's senior colleges. Differential tuition would enable the universities to recognize variation in costs among programs and campuses, and to maximize tuition revenue by taking into account demand for programs and regional costs. The current uniform tuition policy is perhaps the main reason why New York's public system lacks flagship schools and programs, in stark contrast to many of its peers.

SUNY at Buffalo wants to be a flagship public school in New York, and it is often treated as such in national rankings. Compared to other public flagships, average in-state tuition and fees for SUNY at Buffalo undergraduates were more than \$1,000 below the national average and the fourth-lowest among the flagship campuses in the 14 peer states. SUNY at Buffalo's fees are slightly higher than those of the other public university centers in New York (SUNY Albany, SUNY Binghamton, SUNY Stony Brook, and CUNY University Center).

The main concern with the proposed tuition policy changes is that they could lead to tuition increases that could limit access for low-income students. This concern is especially salient for students in two-year community colleges. In contrast with New York's public senior colleges, tuition and fees at SUNY's and CUNY's two-year community colleges are [relatively high](#) in a national context. New York's in-state tuition and fees at community colleges in 2010-11 were the third highest among peer states (after Massachusetts and New Jersey), and \$1,252 above the national average.

The impact of higher and differential tuition on affordability and student choice of schools for needy students should be mitigated through financial aid. Low-income SUNY and CUNY students already receive considerable aid in paying tuition through New York's Tuition Assistance Program (TAP), one of the largest and most generous financial aid programs in the nation. TAP would likely have to become even larger under the new tuition policy outlined above.

In contrast, the last two enacted budgets have [reduced TAP](#) from \$5,000 to \$4,000 for students in two-year colleges. In addition, graduate students will not be eligible to receive TAP, and eligibility standards will be tighter in terms of academic standing and financial means. This trend should be reversed, if state leaders implement the policy changes necessary for a more rational system of funding public higher education in New York.

The upcoming summit will bring SUNY at Buffalo one step closer to that goal. But it should be only the first in a series of steps to establish a more rational tuition policy and greater regulatory freedom for New York's entire system of public higher education. Every campus deserves what is now being considered only for Buffalo.

The author is Senior Research Associate at the Citizens Budget Commission (www.cbcny.org), a nonpartisan, nonprofit civic organization devoted to influencing constructive change in the finances and services of New York State and New York City governments.

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