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EDITORIALS

Set UB free

State university system's campuses need flexibility, better tuition policy

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Most people would agree that college and university presidents and chancellors have learned the ABCs of life and are capable of handling the management of their own institutions. Unless, apparently, those presidents happen to run a state university in New York. Then they're subject to the type of over-regulation that requires a detailed explanation for practically every paper clip.

With that kind of help from the state, it's no wonder the State University of New York board of trustees has laid out its own plan to generate more money for public higher education and increase SUNY's competitiveness nationwide.

The Legislature and governor should allow SUNY leeway to make independent decisions. That kind of flexibility is critical for institutions such as the University at Buffalo, where the UB 2020 expansion plan was listed once again last week as the top development priority of local leaders.

Gov. David A. Paterson recently proposed tuition increases of \$600 a year throughout the SUNY system, with some of that money to be steered away from college operations and into state coffers. Although the plan died, SUNY officials voiced their dissatisfaction with any plan that includes the diversion of tuition money. Instead, they have proposed "a rational tuition plan" involving regular, predictable increases based on the Higher Education Price Index.

The proposal already has run into opposition from one key state legislator, Assemblywoman Deborah J. Glick, a Manhattan Democrat and chairwoman of the Assembly's Higher Education Committee. Glick makes a valid point about the necessity of colleges to remain creative about raising revenue through other sources, such as philanthropy or public-private partnerships. But there's also an upside to allowing leaders to lead. How much to raise tuition and where to spend the money is better determined by campus administrators, and other flexibility issues — such as negotiating projects with third-party developers on campus land, as other states' universities do — demand local management.

Preapproval for purchasing also seems an unnecessary restriction for campuses already working within budgets. The 2008 report of the New York State Commission on Higher Education re-examined higher education in this state and found that SUNY is as regulated as any other system in the country — and perhaps even more. SUNY is



one of only four state systems required to preaudit university expenditures — with Kansas, Mississippi and South Dakota.

Currently, SUNY students face a form of “tuition roulette,” sporadic and steep tuition jumps instead of predictable incremental ones. The current approach, with the state keeping much of the money, makes any tuition jump a political and economic issue instead of an education resources one. And students don’t get what they pay for, the state does.

When local political and business leaders listed regional priorities last week and put UB expansion at the top, they recognized a truth: State universities, and UB in particular, can be major contributors to economic recovery. That’s true not only locally, but statewide. SUNY should gain the ability to prove its point.

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