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State must help UB

Flagship campus needs the flexibility to pursue its vision for WNY future

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John Simpson doesn't seem to know how to take no for an answer. Lucky for Buffalo.

Simpson, president of the University at Buffalo, is angry at what he sees as the state's counterproductive decision to reduce funding, just as the university is undertaking an ambitious and important growth plan called UB2020. Not just angry, but somewhat defiant -- and usefully so.

If state officials can't adequately fund the expansion program, Simpson recently said, "They need to get out of the way and let us do it ourselves." Give that man a diploma.

Simpson is exactly on target when he observes that funding UB2020 is an investment in Western New York's nascent new economy, not a costly burden. The development of a knowledge-based economy -- at UB, the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus and elsewhere -- is this region's ticket toward prosperity, a goal that counts among its benefits a diminished need to beg Albany for state tax dollars. Investment now pays off later.

Simpson has a number of no-cost ideas to unshackle the university and increase its ability to pursue this program. They include allowing small, regular tuition increases instead of occasional large ones, and freeing SUNY campuses from "a battery of outdated and inefficient laws" -- allowing them, for example, to lease and sell land. He also wants Albany to refrain from demanding further cuts in SUNY's budget. The campus is already facing the likelihood of a \$20 million reduction.

This is a desperate time in state government. The stock market is anemic, depleting the flow of money to Albany, which gets 20 percent of its annual revenues from the state's financial sector, largely in New York City. There will be pain, and everyone is going to feel it.

But the response to crisis doesn't have to be panicked. Budgets all around the state will have to be cut, but it makes no sense to take a one-size-fits-all approach when that approach can -- and will -- make matters worse. If Albany can hasten our economic recovery by nurturing UB's growth plan, it is irresponsible not to do so. A planned \$1.2 billion incentive for a technology plant in the Albany area is evidence the state sees a need for information industry investment despite the current crisis; the same holds true for Buffalo.

It has been observed many times before, and already in the current fiscal environment, that crisis offers the

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opportunity to make reforms that are otherwise difficult to achieve. So it is with UB and the entire SUNY system.

Albany needs to limit budget cuts to those that are truly unavoidable and to look closely at giving more freedom to the university system so that its campuses can make the best decisions for their specific needs. That approach works in other states. It is time, at this moment of challenge, for Albany to follow that lead.

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