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Another Voice / Budget crisis

Regional answer to state financial woes is UB 2020

By John B. Simpson

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The waves of bad economic news have New York State cutting nearly \$3 billion from this year's budget. With coming years looking no better, Gov. David Paterson plans to seek creative remedies to the crisis.

Conventional wisdom would argue that our battered economy will likely have to make do with even less support from Albany. But is it possible that the budget crisis presents a timely opportunity to take bold action that would have enormous benefit for our region, with no additional cost to taxpayers?

The answer is yes. The University at Buffalo already is a major force in our region's economy. With the right reforms from Albany — and a halt to further cuts — UB is poised to become much more. We can become Western New York's admission ticket to the 21st century economy.

Our plan for getting there is called UB 2020, and it already has the support of business, labor, local elected officials and the community.



Perhaps most remarkably, UB 2020 has the potential to stimulate our regional economy at a time when the state's financial indicators are heading in the opposite direction. But to achieve it, we need common-sense policy and regulatory changes in Albany.

Two weeks ago, I outlined a series of no-cost, high-impact measures that Albany could adopt right away that would unshackle UB from outmoded regulations. These changes, which are commonplace for virtually all our nation's great universities, would save taxpayers millions of dollars while accelerating the pace of UB's growth.

They are needed to achieve UB 2020, our plan for finally, and fully, achieving the vast potential of our university and our community. But right now, New York is in a defensive crouch, cutting higher education at precisely the time we should be bolstering it.

UB already is facing cuts to our state support that could reach \$20 million or more this year. That's about 10 percent of the total direct support we receive from New York's taxpayers.

But cutting without selective reinvestment and deregulation destroys our future hopes. The best chance for our region's future requires that we invest selectively in higher education. UB 2020 is an investment, not a cost.

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I believe that we must tell Albany that a knowledge-based economy is the solution to our problems, and that now is the time to make the policy reforms, and promise of future investment, which will transform UB from a good research university into a great one, and by doing so, stimulate the transformation of our regional economy.

You can help us get these reforms. Our governor and Legislature will act positively on UB 2020 when they understand that it is Western New York's highest priority.

Right now, we in Western New York have the remarkable power to take control of our region's future. I believe we must use this power, and turn this crisis into opportunity for our region.

John B. Simpson is president of the University at Buffalo.

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