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Simpson has it right

State deserves UB president's scorn, but goal remains to get UB 2020 done

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Now that he no longer has to care what anyone in New York thinks of him, University at Buffalo President John B. Simpson was free the other day to unload on the state's leadership— particularly in the New York State Assembly—for its dishonest and short-sighted treatment of his institution and the state's overall system of higher education.

But whoever takes over for Simpson, after he retires early next year and returns to California, will have to care. Because the power to unleash UB, along with the other links in the State University of New York chain, still will reside in Albany.

Simpson's service to the university and the community has been exemplary. And his vision of UB as a primary engine of the city's long-awaited civic, intellectual and economic recovery was true and inspiring.

But Simpson, good academic that he is, may have been undone by an academic's notion that arguments are won with facts. In Albany, facts don't matter all that much. They are either played to one's advantage, turned upside down, denied or ignored.

The legislation that would have given UB the power to make its own way in the world, and pull a lot of Buffalo along with it, was killed in the Assembly under color of an argument that the plan would have resulted in higher tuition rates, and that that would mean a college education would have become unaffordable for even more young New Yorkers.

The argument has power because even people who don't have much education know that getting one can be the key to a better life. And there are, undoubtedly, many people who need more education, and have all the devotion and mental ability to acquire one, but are stopped cold by the price of admission.

But that argument, as Simpson repeated in his final address to the community Wednesday, was never a reason for stopping the plan. And the Assembly leadership was engaging in willful ignorance not to see that point.

Giving UB and other SUNY schools the ability to set their own tuition rates, within certain limits, would be a significant improvement to the system. For one thing, it would mean that the universities and colleges would have the wherewithal to grant more financial aid to deserving students.

More importantly, it would also mean that the schools would plow the money those students save, borrow and work for into improving the quality of those students' education, because the Legislature and/or the governor would no longer be able to siphon off a big chunk of that money to help them try to balance the rest of the state budget.

Simpson said he was angry about what had happened. He should be, and so should everyone else who cares about Buffalo, New York and the cause of good government.

Next year, the quest for UB empowerment will begin again, with new university leadership, a new governor and, perhaps, some new legislators. The academic planning and factual groundwork have been well laid out by Simpson and his staff.

It will now be the responsibility of whoever picks up Simpson's torch to also apply, or acquire, the political skills that will be necessary to make the dream a reality.

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