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Reforming SUNY

Campus management budget proposal is a good and needed move by governor

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Gov. David A. Paterson's proposal to allow more autonomy for state university campuses—in effect, taking the UB 2020 plan statewide—is a bold step that should be followed by the State Legislature if State University of New York campuses are to boost their ability to compete with the rest of the nation.

Paterson's major reform plan, of which the SUNY proposal is part, was unveiled with his budget. While that budget focuses on the state's fiscal crisis, this piece of the plan is a long-term strategic change nearly identical to legislation proposed last year for the University at Buffalo.

As Paterson indicated, campus presidents across the state have been frustrated at the practice of having to check in with Albany for everything from chalk purchases to the cost of tuition. Such a lack of flexibility during tough economic times makes competing for students all the more difficult, because universities in other states have the ability to be more nimble in their own planning and budgeting decisions.

Western New York's State Legislature delegation last year proposed the "UB 2020 Flexibility and Economic Growth Act" to remedy that. Paterson apparently agreed in whole or large part, because he adopted and applied the concept to the entire SUNY system. Now it's a matter of getting the full Legislature on board. The UB bill was passed by the Senate last year but never reached the Assembly for a vote, because of a concern that other SUNY campuses were being left out. Paterson seems to have resolved that issue.

The biggest piece of the governor's proposal is perhaps the most important—changing the way tuition is increased.

By abandoning the traditional sudden increases that have dealt a severe and unpredictable blow to students and their parents—and, ultimately, to universities and colleges—the state would give campus officials the ability to raise tuitions at a reasonable and incremental pace. SUNY schools then would have even more flexibility to improve academic offerings, and campus facilities.

There's much to commend in the governor's proposal. Besides the ability to raise tuition, SUNY campuses would be able to lease and sell, borrow money through bonds from an entity such as the state Dormitory Authority or a local industrial development agency, and buy goods and services without an additional level of state review.

Such opponents as Assemblywoman Deborah Glick of Manhattan, who brings up tuition impacts on lower-income and middle-income families as a factor, should consider whether sudden increases due to the often

fluctuating state financial situation aren't worse than smaller predictable increases that can be "locked in" for students over the course of four years.

Local campus management is not a complete answer to SUNY problems, but it does offer campus officials the ability to better plan and implement improvements to be more timely and efficient in an increasingly competitive educational climate.

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