

December 16, 2007

## So How Do We Get to Berkeley? Spend Big on SUNY, Panel Says

By [KAREN W. ARENSON](#)

AMHERST, N.Y. — John B. Simpson, the president of the State University at Buffalo, incessantly buttonholes people to assert that the way to remake western New York is to remake his university, one of the state university system's four research centers.

“For this area to be viable,” he said in an interview in his art-filled office, “the best thing they can do, the only thing they can do, is develop great research universities.”

As the largest and most comprehensive university of the [State University of New York](#)'s 64 campuses, Buffalo is a good yardstick for measuring just how far New York has traveled — yet how short it has fallen from [Nelson A. Rockefeller](#)'s vision of creating a premier public university system.

With specialties in biomedical sciences and earthquake engineering, it is one of only two SUNY campuses, along with Stony Brook, that belong to the Association of American Universities, an elite group of 62 research universities. But even its national reputation, buzz and research dollars put it nowhere near the ranks of the University of California, Berkeley, and the [University of Michigan](#) at Ann Arbor.

Gov. [Eliot Spitzer](#) established a State Commission on Higher Education to find ways to improve the system. In a report to be presented on Monday, the panel will recommend sweeping changes in how SUNY and the [City University of New York](#) are governed.

The report, obtained by The New York Times, calls for significantly higher financial support for public universities from the state and from increased tuition revenues. It recommends allowing the universities to set their own tuition without state approval and to vary tuition rates by campus. The report also urges hiring 2,000 additional full-time faculty members and creating a \$3 billion innovation fund for research grants in fields that can fuel economic development.

The recommendations will test the political will to give the institutions the resources and autonomy they say they need to flourish, especially for a state with leading private universities,

like Columbia and Cornell.

“There is this history of chafing between the public universities and the privates in New York State, and the publics have historically not won,” said Dr. Simpson, a member of the 30-person commission.

In his campaign last year, Mr. Spitzer asked why New York does not have a Berkeley of the East and said he wanted New York’s colleges to be among the finest in the nation.

“We certainly don’t have a Berkeley,” said Lloyd Constantine, Mr. Spitzer’s senior adviser, who worked with the commission and visited all the SUNY campuses. “California has more than one. In a state like ours, we could certainly have a couple. Their importance is that they are great schools, and they also lift the entire system.”

California and some other states have invested heavily in public research universities for decades and are not stopping for New York to catch up. Still other states, like Georgia and Arizona, have been pouring money into their public systems to try to rise in the rankings.

“SUNY is a very solid state university system; it’s just not a leader,” said Arthur E. Levine, the president of the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, who earned a doctorate at Buffalo. “It would cost so much money to make it into something different.”

Governor Rockefeller spent millions in the 1960s to lay the foundation for what he hoped would be a nationally renowned public university system, with research campuses at Buffalo, Stony Brook, Albany and Binghamton. But the drive to create a Berkeley in Buffalo or elsewhere in the state stalled in the face of economic problems, New York City’s fiscal crisis, and taxpayers’ recoiling from violent student protests. The result was significant layoffs at SUNY. More recently, Gov. [George E. Pataki](#) increased capital investment but cut money for operations.

SUNY has grown substantially since the system was cobbled together from teachers’ colleges, agricultural schools, and swamps and farmland. Today it has more than 400,000 students at its research campuses, comprehensive colleges and community colleges.

Still, only 55 percent of college students in New York are in public institutions, compared with 79 percent nationally. Higher education draws less than 7 percent of the state budget in New York, compared with a national average of 11 percent.

Until now, the state has kept tuition at the campuses equalized. Buffalo’s undergraduate tuition

is the same as for all SUNY four-year colleges: \$4,350 for state residents and \$10,610 for students from out of state, compared with \$8,384 and \$19,620 at Berkeley. Buffalo does tack on more than \$1,800 in fees.

Researchers say that while the relatively low tuition may be politically popular, it has not allowed any of the campuses to soar in the rankings.

“Typically, the SUNY board of trustees doesn’t understand what a research university is,” said Stephen B. Sample, who was the president of Buffalo for nine years before taking the same post at the [University of Southern California](#) in 1991. “One of the challenges I had as president of Buffalo was to help the board of trustees understand how different these institutions were, that Buffalo was not just bigger, but that it was a different animal, a different kind of institution.”

Buffalo, which became part of SUNY in 1962, has 28,000 students and 1,185 full-time faculty members. It sits on a bleak 1,200-acre site here and on two smaller sites in the city.

Some students, like Jack Niejadlik, said they liked the university and the wide variety of programs it offered but were happy to see more hiring and other improvements.

“President Simpson has done a great deal about making his plan visible,” Mr. Niejadlik said. “Things are happening.” Dr. Simpson, recruited from the University of California Santa Cruz four years ago, has an ambitious expansion plan, with the goal of creating a world-class research center that would help rebuild the region’s economy. The plan calls for new construction, and for growing to 35,000 students by 2020.

“We have a huge array of programs for a very small number of students,” said Dr. Simpson. “If we’re going to have all these programs, we’re too small.”

His ideas have won critical backing from business. “Until very recently, if you listed the most important priorities for business, the advancement of SUNY would not have been on the list,” said Andrew J. Rudnick, president of the Buffalo Niagara Partnership, which represents 2,500 employers. Now, he said, there is a recognition that the university “can be part of an economic transformation of this region.”

But to be an agent of change, says Dr. Simpson, the university needs more autonomy. “We get what really amounts to very little financial input from New York State, and we have no control over our finances,” he said. “We can’t raise tuition; we can’t set it. And the underlying state budget is a political football every year.”

Still, the campus is already moving on many fronts. It is offering more freshman seminars and has created an honors college to make its undergraduate programs more attractive. It is adding professors to raise its faculty-student ratio and trying to bring in academic stars who will increase its research money. And it is developing a badly needed physical master plan.

Robert G. Shibley, a Buffalo architecture and planning professor who is advising the president, described the Amherst campus as “a monument to blank walls” and said, “Building soul back into the campus is a major mission of mine.”

All this takes money. Dr. Simpson’s plan for growth does not carry dollar amounts. But a memorandum for the governor’s office said that implementing the blueprint over 13 years would require a one-time investment of \$1.6 billion for new faculty members, new residence halls and other capital improvements, and infusions of \$226 million a year for additional faculty members.

Mr. Constantine said that the numbers may seem large if seen as only for higher education, but that they are “more realistic” if also viewed as investments in economic development, work force development, urban revitalization and the future of western New York.

“But it has to be done right,” he added.

[Copyright 2007 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)

---